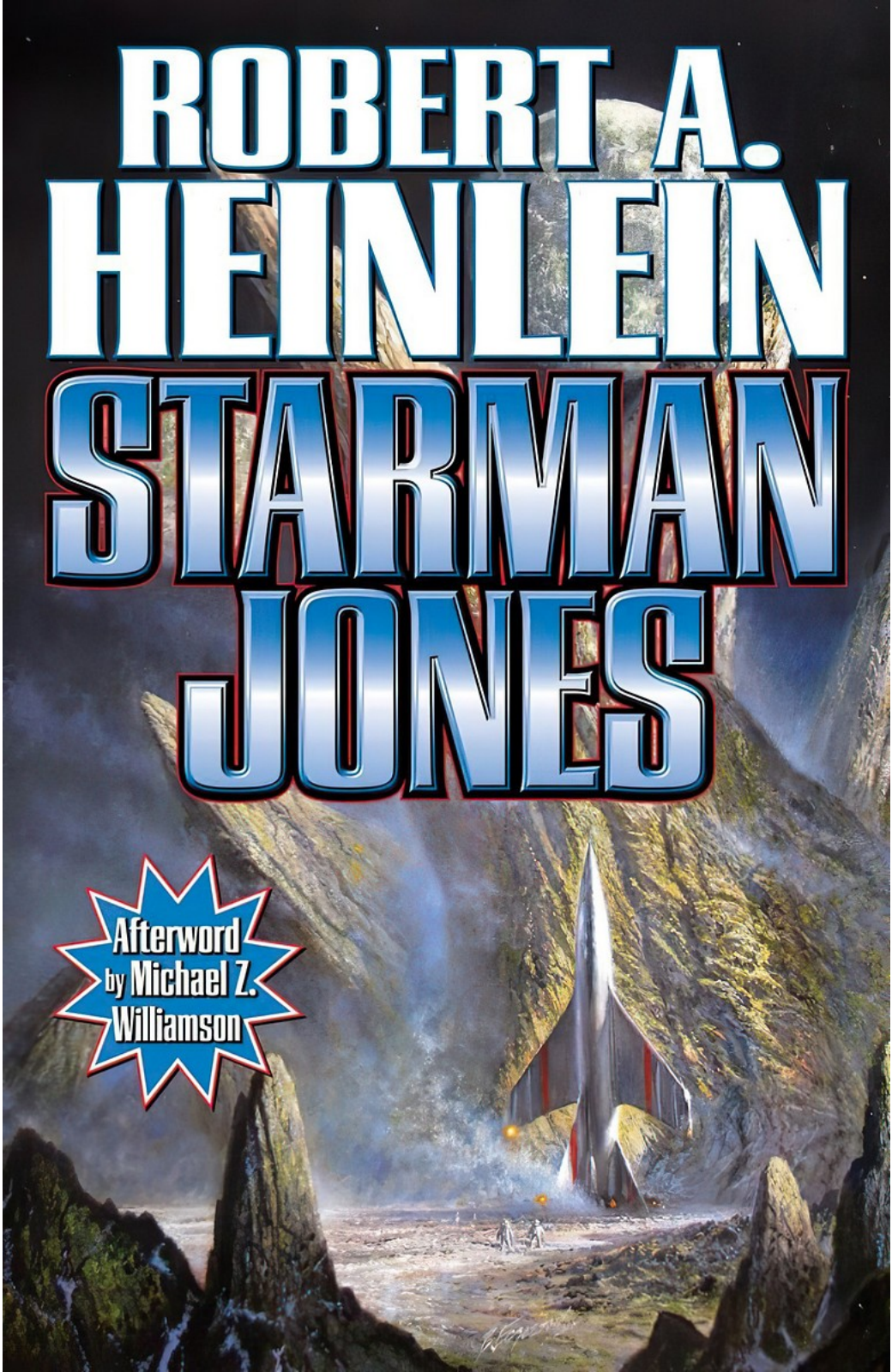
ROBERT A. HEINLEIN

STARMAN JONES



Heinlein's Juveniles
Volume Three

Robert A. Heinlein

Starman Jones
The Star Beast
Tunnel in the Sky

STARMAN JONES

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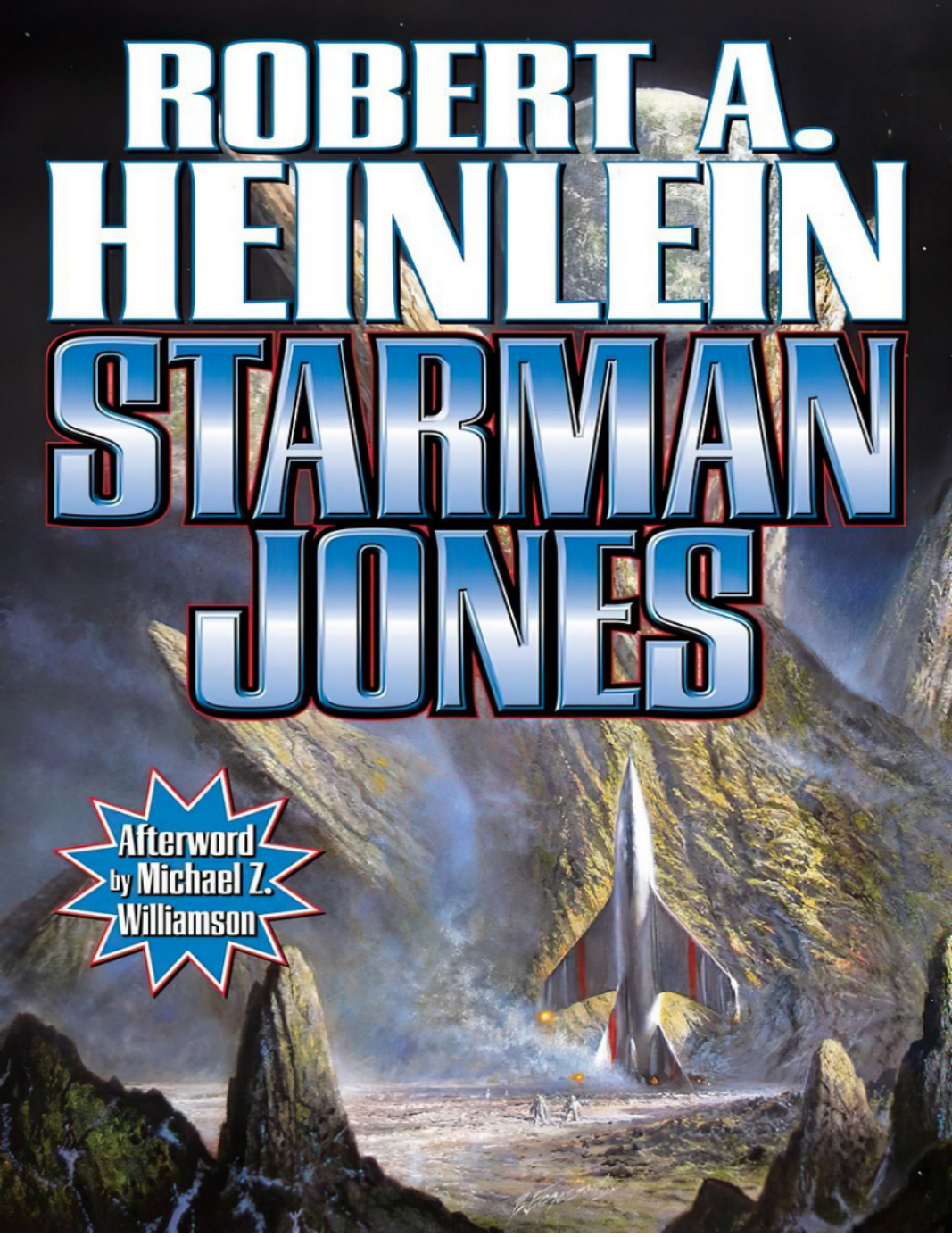

STARMAN JONES

ROBERT A. HEINLEIN

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STARMAN JONES

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Dedication

For My Friend, Jim Smith

INTRODUCTION
by William H. Patterson, Jr.

Max Jones is such a likeable young man that we forget he is one of science fiction's collection of bad boys—very bad by the standards of 1953 when *Starman Jones* was first published. Holden Caulfield (*The Catcher in the Rye,* 1951) is a punk by comparison.

Max is a runaway (from an abusive stepfather and a multiply broken home), an orphan, homeless, and hangs around with a Bad Crowd (if you count quondam Space Marine "Sam Richards" as a "crowd"). He stages (or participates in, which is much the same thing) an elaborate hoax to get a job he wants—and then makes good in a spectacular way and repents his sins.

He is, in short, the very model of a Horatio Alger hero-in-potentia (he even comes *this close* to marrying the boss's daughter, another trick from Alger's grab-bag of poor-boy-makes-good formulas), brushed up and modernized for the 1950s—and Heinlein knew exactly what he was doing. Six years later, recapping his entire career as a writer of children's books, he told his editor:

> I have been writing the Horatio Alger books of this generation, always with the same strongly moral purpose that runs through every line of the Alger books (which strongly influenced me; I read them all). "Honesty is the best policy."—"Hard work is rewarded."—"There is no easy road to success."—"Courage above all."—"Studying hard pays off, in happiness as well as in money"—"Stand on your own feet"—"Don't ever be bullied"—"Take your medicine"—"The world always has a place for a man who works, but none for a loafer." These are the things that the Alger books said to me, in the idiom suited to my generation; I believed them when I read them, I believe them now, and I have constantly tried to say them to a younger generation which I believe has been shamefully neglected by many of the elders responsible for its moral training.

Alger has fallen under a cloud and far out of fashion now—

and the very idea of "moral training" has a quaint ring to it in the first decades of the twenty-first century. But it is a subject Heinlein visits over and over again (what else is the class in History and Moral Philosophy in *Starship Troopers* but the kind of intellectual prelude to moral training suitable for teenagers in a public school?). Heinlein was a firm believer in the principle —taken from Emerson and Thoreau as much as anyone—that you build yourself from the ground up, and that the process of *bildung*, especially, is a conscious craft. This book is in fact dedicated to a teenaged acquaintance who shaped his own character out of adversity.

You participate in making your own character. That is another lesson he got from Horatio Alger (who got it from Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, as American as you can get) and repackaged for the generation that was to become the parents of the generation of entitlement and victims. The debates he and his editor, Alice Dalgliesh (another award-winning writer of books for young people) had about the moral position of *Starman Jones* show that these values lived then—and the longevity of *Starman Jones* now, after more than fifty years and well into the twenty-first century, shows that those value of hard work, seizing opportunities, "fortune favors the prepared" (and, yes, sometimes even marrying the boss's daughter) are alive to us even now.

Samuel J. Moskowitz made the observation that *Starman Jones* is an expansion of Heinlein's second story, "Misfit." Heinlein often revisited his earliest story materials, but in this case he was also revisiting a recent story, *Between Planets*, his "boy's book" for 1951. The "Horst-Conrad-Milne" interplanetary space drive of *Between Planets* has become in *Starman Jones* a sophisticated interstellar drive (though Milne got left off the name this time—as sometimes happens in real life; there is plenty of Einstein in *Starman Jones*, but no mention of Hermann Minkowski).

But Heinlein is reworking more than story figures. *Starman Jones* is almost unique among Heinlein's books by having so much of it taken from real life. About the basic plot line, Heinlein said in his Accession Notes for the Robert A. Heinlein Archive at Special Collections and Archives of the University Library, U.C. Santa Cruz:

> This book was written without an outline from a situation in the early 19th century. Two American

> teenagers took off in a sail boat, were picked up by a China Clipper, were gone two years—and returned to Boston with one of them in command. This incident is true and consequently preposterous. I came across this note card in a file and decided to try to make it plausible in terms of space travel—set up the situation and let the story write itself.

Well, not quite "write itself"—the character of the abusive stepfather was drawn from life, a contractor Heinlein had dealt with in Colorado Springs. Max at least got away; Heinlein had to carry a gun for most of 1950 to dissuade his own Montgomery from carrying out his threats.

And then his editor objected to Montgomery as too "pulp-villainish."

Miss Dalgliesh was always objecting to something or other she feared librarians would not like. As Heinlein often remarked, that's the trouble with real life: it lacks the plausibility of fiction. He almost did not write *Starman Jones* for that very reason …

I'm glad he did.

Come travel, then, to the stars with the boy from Arkansas.

1
THE *TOMAHAWK*

Max liked this time of day, this time of year. With the crops in, he could finish his evening chores early and be lazy. When he had slopped the hogs and fed the chickens, instead of getting supper he followed a path to a rise west of the barn and lay down in the grass, unmindful of chiggers. He had a book with him that he had drawn from the county library last Saturday, Bonforte's *Sky Beasts: A Guide to Exotic Zoology,* but he tucked it under his head as a pillow. A blue jay made remarks about his honesty, then shut up when he failed to move. A red squirrel sat on a stump and stared at him, then went on burying nuts.

Max kept his eyes to the northwest. He favored this spot because from it he could see the steel stilts and guide rings of the Chicago, Springfield, & Earthport Ring Road emerge from a slash in the ridge to his right. There was a guide ring at the mouth of the cut, a great steel hoop twenty feet high. A pair of stilt-like tripods supported another ring a hundred feet out from the cut. A third and last ring, its stilts more than a hundred feet high to keep it level with the others, lay west of him where the ground dropped still more sharply into the valley below. Half way up it he could see the power-link antenna pointing across the gap.

On his left the guides of the C.S.&E. picked up again on the far side of the gap. The entering ring was larger to allow for maximum windage deviation; on its stilts was the receptor antenna for the power link. That ridge was steeper; there was only one more ring before the road disappeared into a tunnel. He had read that, on the Moon, entrance rings were no larger than pass-along rings, since there was never any wind to cause variation in ballistic. When he was a child, this entrance ring had been slightly smaller and, during an unprecedented windstorm, a train had struck the ring and produced an unbelievable wreck, with more than four hundred people killed. He had not seen it and his father had not allowed him to poke around afterwards because of the carnage, but the scar of it could still be seen on the lefthand ridge, a darker green than the rest.

He watched the trains go by whenever possible, not wishing

the passengers any bad luck—but still, if there should happen to be a catastrophe, he didn't want to miss it.

Max kept his eyes fixed on the cut; the *Tomahawk* was due any instant. Suddenly there was a silver gleam, a shining cylinder with needle nose burst out of the cut, flashed through the last ring and for a breathless moment was in free trajectory between the ridges. Almost before he could swing his eyes, the projectile entered the ring across the gap and disappeared into the hillside—just as the sound hit him.

It was a thunderclap that bounced around the hills. Max gasped for air. "Boy!" he said softly. "Boy, oh boy!" The incredible sight and the impact on his ears always affected him the same way. He had heard that for the passengers the train was silent, with the sound trailing them, but he did not know; he had never ridden a train and it seemed unlikely, with Maw and the farm to take care of, that he ever would.

He shifted to a sitting position and opened his book, holding it so that he would be aware of the southwestern sky. Seven minutes after the passing of the *Tomahawk* he should be able to see, on a clear evening, the launching orbit of the daily Moonship. Although much farther away and much less dramatic than the nearby jump of the ring train, it was this that he had come to see. Ring trains were all right, but spaceships were his love—even a dinky like the moon shuttle.

But he had just found his place, a description of the intelligent but phlegmatic crustaceans of Epsilon Ceti IV, when he was interrupted by a call behind him. "Oh, Maxie! Maximilian! Max … mil … *yan!"*

He held still and said nothing.

"Max! I can see you, Max—you come at once, hear me?"

He muttered to himself and got to his feet. He moved slowly down the path, watching the sky over his shoulder until the barn cut off his view. Maw was back and that was that—she'd make his life miserable if he didn't come in and help. When she had left that morning he had had the impression that she would be gone overnight—not that she had said so; she never did—but he had learned to read the signs. Now he would have to listen to her complaints and her petty gossip when he wanted to read, or just as bad, be disturbed by the slobbering stereovision serials she favored. He had often been tempted to sabotage the pesky SV set—by rights with an ax! He hardly ever got to see the programs he liked.

When he got in sight of the house he stopped suddenly. He

had supposed that Maw had ridden the bus from the Corners and walked up the draw as usual. But there was a sporty little unicycle standing near the stoop—and there was someone with her.

He had thought at first it was a "foreigner"—but when he got closer he recognized the man. Max would rather have seen a foreigner, any foreigner. Biff Montgomery was a hillman but he didn't work a farm; Max couldn't remember having seen him do any honest work. He had heard it said that Montgomery sometimes hired out as a guard when one of the moonshine stills back in the hills was operating and it might be so—Montgomery was a big, beefy man and the part might fit him.

Max had known Montgomery as long as he could remember, seen him loafing around Clyde's Corners. But he had ordinarily given him "wagon room" and had had nothing to do with him—until lately: Maw had started being seen with him, even gone to barn dances and huskings with him. Max had tried to tell her that Dad wouldn't have liked it. But you couldn't argue with Maw—what she didn't like she just didn't hear. But this was the first time she had ever brought him to the house. Max felt a slow burn of anger starting in him.

"Hurry up, Maxie!" Maw called out. "Don't stand there like a dummy." Max reluctantly moved along and joined them. Maw said, "Maxie, shake hands with your new father," then looked roguish, as if she had said something witty. Max stared and his mouth sagged open.

Montgomery grinned and stuck out a hand. "Yep, Max, you're Max Montgomery now—I'm your new pop. But you can call me Monty."

Max stared at the hand, took it briefly. "My name is Jones," he said flatly.

"Maxie!" protested Maw.

Montgomery laughed jovially. "Don't rush him, Nellie my love. Let Max get used to it. Live and let live; that's my motto." He turned to his wife. "Half a mo', while I get the baggage." From one saddlebag of the unicycle he extracted a wad of mussed clothing; from the other, two flat pint bottles. Seeing Max watching him, he winked and said, "A toast for the bride."

His bride was standing by the door; he started to brush on past her. She protested, "But Monty darling, aren't you going to —"

Montgomery stopped. "Oh. I haven't much experience in these things. Sure." He turned to Max—"Here, take the

baggage"—and shoved bottles and clothes at him. Then he swung her up in his arms, grunting a bit, and carried her over the threshold, put her down and kissed her while she squealed and blushed. Max silently followed them, put the items on the table and turned to the stove. It was cold, he had not used it since breakfast. There was an electric range but it had burned out before his father had died and there had never been money to repair it. He took out his pocket knife, made shavings, added kindling and touched the heap with an Everlite. When it flared up, he went out to fetch a pail of water.

When he came back Montgomery said, "Wondered where you'd gone. Doesn't this dump even have running water?"

"No." Max set the pail down, then added a couple of chunks of cord wood to the fire.

His Maw said, "Maxie, you should have had dinner ready."

Montgomery interceded pleasantly with, "Now, my dear, he didn't know we were coming. And it leaves time for a toast." Max kept his back to them, giving his full attention to slicing side meat. The change was so overwhelming that he had not had time to take it in.

Montgomery called to him. "Here, son! Drink your toast to the bride."

"I've got to get supper."

"Nonsense! Here's your glass. Hurry up."

Montgomery had poured a finger of amber liquid into the glass; his own glass was half full and that of his bride at least a third. Max accepted it and went to the pail, thinned it with a dipper of water.

"You'll ruin it."

"I'm not used to it."

"Oh, well. Here's to the blushing bride—and our happy family! Bottoms up!"

Max took a cautious sip and put it down. It tasted to him like the bitter tonic the district nurse had given him one spring. He turned back to his work, only to be interrupted again. "Hey, you didn't finish it."

"Look, I got to cook. You don't want me to burn supper, do you?"

Montgomery shrugged. "Oh, well—the more for the rest of us. We'll use yours for a chaser. Sonny boy, when I was your age I could empty a tumbler neat and then stand on my hands."

Max had intended to sup on side meat and warmed-over biscuits, but there was only half a pan left of the biscuits. He

scrambled eggs in the grease of the side meat, brewed coffee, and let it go at that. When they sat down, Montgomery looked at it and announced, “My dear, starting tomorrow I’ll expect you to live up to what you told me about your cooking. Your boy isn’t much of a cook.” Nevertheless, he ate heartily. Max decided not to tell him that he was a better cook than Maw—he’d find out soon enough.

Presently, Montgomery sat back and wiped his mouth, then poured himself more coffee and lighted a cigar. Maw said, “Maxie, dear, what’s the dessert?”

“Dessert? Well—there’s that ice cream in the freezer, left over from Solar Union Day.”

She looked vexed. “Oh, dear! I’m afraid it’s not there.”

“Huh?”

“Well, I’m afraid I sort of ate it one afternoon when you were out in the south field. It was an awfully hot day.”

Max did not say anything, he was unsurprised. But she was not content to leave it. “You didn’t fix any dessert, Max? But this is a *special* occasion.”

Montgomery took his cigar out of his mouth. “Stow it, my dear,” he said kindly. “I’m not much for sweets, I’m a meat-and-potatoes man—sticks to the ribs. Let’s talk of pleasanter things.” He turned to Max. “Max, what can you do besides farm?”

Max was startled. “Huh? I’ve never done anything else. Why?”

Montgomery touched the ash of the cigar to his plate. “Because you are all through farming.”

For the second time in two hours Max had more change than he could grasp. “Why? What do you mean?”

“Because we’ve sold the farm.”

Max felt as if he had had a rug jerked out from under him. But he could tell from Maw’s face that it was true. She looked the way she always did when she had put one over on him—triumphant and slightly appre hensive.

“Dad wouldn’t like that,” he said to her harshly. “This land has been in our family for four hundred years.”

“Now, Maxie! I’ve told you I don’t know how many times that I wasn’t cut out for a farm. I was city raised.”

“Clyde’s Corners! Some city!”

“It wasn’t a farm. And I was just a young girl when your father brought me here—you were already a big boy. I’ve still got my life before me. I can’t have it buried on a farm.”

Max raised his voice. “But you promised Dad you’d …”

“Stow it,” Montgomery said firmly. “And keep a civil tongue

in your head when you speak to your mother—and to me."

Max shut up.

"The land is sold and that's that. How much do you figure this parcel is worth?"

"Why, I've never thought about it."

"Whatever you thought, I got more." He gave Max a wink. "Yes, sir! It was a lucky day for your mother and you when she set her cap for me. I'm a man with his ear to the ground. I knew why an agent was around buying up these worn-out, worthless pieces of property. I …"

"I use government fertilizers."

"Worthless I said and worthless I meant. For farming, that is." He put his finger along his nose, looked sly, and explained. It seemed that some big government power project was afoot for which this area had been selected—Montgomery was mysterious about it, from which Max concluded that he didn't know very much. A syndicate was quietly buying up land in anticipation of government purchase. "So we held 'em up for five times what they expected to pay. Pretty good, huh?"

Maw put in, "You see, Maxie? If your father had known that we would ever get …"

"Quiet, Nellie!"

"But I was just going to tell him how much …"

" 'Quiet!' I said."

She shut up. Montgomery pushed his chair back, stuck his cigar in his mouth, and got up. Max put water on to heat for the dishes, scraped the plates and took the leavings out to the chickens. He stayed out quite a spell, looking at the stars and trying to think. The idea of having Biff Montgomery in the family shook him to his bones. He wondered just what rights a stepfather had, or, rather a step-stepfather, a man who had married his stepmother. He didn't know.

Presently, he decided that he had to go back inside, much as he hated to. He found Montgomery standing at the bookshelf he had built over the stereo receiver; the man was pawing at the books and had piled several on the receiver. He looked around. "You back? Stick around, I want you to tell me about the livestock."

Maw appeared in the doorway. "Darling," she said to Montgomery, "can't that wait till morning?"

"Don't be in a hurry, my dear," he answered. "That auctioneer fellow will be here early. I've got to have the inventory ready." He continued to pull books down. "Say, these are pretty things."

He held in his hands half a dozen volumes, printed on the finest of thin paper and bound in limp plastic. “I wonder what they’re worth? Nellie, hand me my specs.”

Max advanced hastily, reached for them. “Those are mine!”

“Huh?” Montgomery glanced at him, then held the books high in the air. “You’re too young to own anything. No, everything goes. A clean sweep and a fresh start.”

“They’re mine! My uncle gave them to me.” He appealed to his mother. “Tell him, Maw.”

Montgomery said quietly, “Yes, Nellie, set this youngster straight—before I have to correct him.”

Nellie looked worried. “Well, I don’t rightly know. They did belong to Chet.”

“And Chet was your brother? Then you’re Chet’s heir, not this young cub.”

“He wasn’t her brother, he was her brother-in-law!”

“So? No matter. Your father was your uncle’s heir, then, and your mother is your father’s heir. Not you, you’re a minor. That’s the law, son. Sorry.” He put the books on the shelf but remained standing in front of them.

Max felt his right upper lip begin to twitch uncontrollably; he knew that he would not be able to talk coherently. His eyes filled with tears of rage so that he could hardly see. “You … you *thief!”*

Nellie let out a squawk. “Max!”

Montgomery’s face became coldly malignant. “Now you’ve gone too far. I’m afraid you’ve earned a taste of the strap.” His fingers started unbuckling his heavy belt.

Max took a step backward. Montgomery got the belt loose and took a step forward. Nellie squealed, “Monty! *Please!”*

“Keep out of this, Nellie.” To Max he said, “We might as well get it settled once and for all who is boss around here. Apologize!”

Max did not answer. Montgomery repeated, “Apologize, and we’ll say no more about it.” He twitched the belt like a cat lashing its tail. Max took another step back; Montgomery stepped forward and grabbed at him.

Max ducked and ran out the open door into darkness. He did not stop until he was sure that Montgom ery was not following. Then he caught his breath, still raging. He was almost sorry that Montgomery had not chased him; he didn’t think that anyone could match him on his home grounds in the dark. He knew where the wood pile was; Montgomery didn’t. He knew where

the hog wallow was. Yes, he knew where the well was—even *that.*

It was a long time before he quieted down enough to think rationally. When he did, he was glad it had ended so easily, Montgomery outweighed him a lot and was reputed to be a mean one in a fight.

If it *had* ended, he corrected. He wondered if Montgomery would decide to forget it by morning. The light was still on in the living room; he took shelter in the barn and waited, sitting down on the dirt floor and leaning against the planks. After a while, he felt terribly tired. He considered sleeping in the barn, but there was no fit place to lie down, even though the old mule was dead. Instead, he got up and looked at the house.

The light was out in the living room, but he could see a light in the bedroom; they were still awake, sure ly. Someone had closed the outer door after his flight; it did not lock so there was no difficulty getting in, but he was afraid that Montgomery might hear him. His own room was a shed added at the kitchen end of the main room, opposite the bedroom, but it had no outside door.

No matter—he had solved that problem when he had first grown old enough to wish to get in and out at night without consulting his elders. He crept around the house, found the saw horse, placed it under his window, got on and wiggled loose the nail that held the window. A moment later he stepped silently down into his own room. The door to the main part of the house was closed but he decided not to risk switching on the light; Montgomery might take it into his head to come out into the living room and see a crack of fight under his door. He slipped quietly out of his clothes and crawled into his cot.

Sleep wouldn't come. Once he began to feel that warm drowsiness, then some tiny noise had brought him wide, stiff awake. Probably just a mouse—but for an instant he had thought that Montgomery was standing over his bed. With his heart pounding, he sat up on the edge of his cot, still in his skin.

Presently, he faced up to the problem of what he was to do—not just for the next hour, not just tomorrow morning, but the following morning and all the mornings after that. Montgomery alone presented no problem; he would not voluntarily stay in the same county with the man. But how about Maw?

His father had told him, when he had known that he was dying, "Take care of your mother, son." Well, he had done so. He had made a crop every year—food in the house and a little

money, even if things had been close. When the mule died, he had made do, borrowing McAllister's team and working it out in labor.

But had Dad meant that he had to take care of his stepmother even if she remarried? It had never occurred to him to consider it. Dad had told him to look out for her and he had done so, even though it had put a stop to school and did not seem to have any end to it.

She was no longer Mrs. Jones, but Mrs. Montgomery. Had Dad meant for him to support Mrs. Montgomery?

Of course not! When a woman married, her husband supported her. Everybody knew that. And Dad wouldn't expect him to put up with Montgomery. He stood up, his mind suddenly made up.

The only question was what to take with him.

There was little to take. Groping in the dark he found the rucksack he used for hunting hikes and stuffed into it his other shirt and his socks. He added Uncle Chet's circular astrogation slide rule and the piece of volcanic glass his uncle had brought back for him from the Moon. His citizen's identification card, his toothbrush, and his father's razor—not that he needed *that* very often—about completed the plunder.

There was a loose board back of his cot. He felt for it, pulled it out and groped between the studs—found nothing. He had been hiding a little money from time to time against a rainy day, as Maw couldn't or wouldn't save. But apparently, she had found it on one of her snooping tours. Well, he still had to leave; it just made it a little more difficult.

He took a deep breath. There was something he *must* get … Uncle Chet's books … and they were still (presumably) on the shelf against the wall common with the bedroom. But he *had* to get them, even at the risk of meeting Montgomery.

Cautiously, most slowly, he opened the door into the living room, stood there with sweat pouring down him. There was still a crack of light under the bedroom door and he hesitated, almost unable to force himself to go on. He heard Montgomery muttering something and Maw giggle.

As his eyes adjusted he could see by the faint light leaking out under the bedroom door something piled at the outer door. It was a deadfall alarm of pots and pans, sure to make a dreadful clatter if the door were opened. Apparently, Montgomery had counted on him coming back and expected to be ready to take care of him. He was very glad that he had sneaked in the

window.

No use putting it off—he crept across the floor, mindful of the squeaky board near the table. He could not see but he could feel and the volumes were known to his fingers. Carefully he slid them out, being sure not to knock over the others.

He was all the way back to his own door when he remembered the library book. He stopped in sudden panic.

He couldn't go back. They might hear him this time—or Montgomery might get up for a drink of water or something.

But in his limited horizon, the theft of a public library book—or failure to return it, which was the same thing—was, if not a mortal sin, at least high on the list of shameful crimes. He stood there, sweating and thinking about it.

Then he went back, the whole long trek, around the squeaky board and tragically onto one he had not remembered. He froze after he hit it, but apparently it had not alarmed the couple in the room beyond. At last he was leaning over the SV receiver and groping at the shelf.

Montgomery, in pawing the books, had changed their arrangement. One after another he had to take them down and try to identify it by touch, opening each and feeling for the perforations on the title page.

It was the fourth one he handled. He got back to his room hurrying slowly, unbearably anxious but afraid to move fast. There at last, he began to shake and had to wait until it wore off. He didn't chance closing his door but got into his clothes in the dark. Moments later he crept through his window, found the saw horse with his toe, and stepped quietly to the ground.

His shoes were stuffed on top of the books in his rucksack; he decided to leave them there until he was well clear of the house, rather than chance the noise he might make with his feet shod. He swung wide around the house and looked back. The bedroom light was still on; he started to angle down toward the road when he noticed Montgomery's unicycle. He stopped.

If he continued, he would come to the road the bus passed along. Whether he turned right or left there, Montgomery would have a fifty-fifty chance of catching him on the unicycle. Having no money, he was dependent on Shank's ponies to put distance under him; he could not take the bus.

Shucks! Montgomery wouldn't try to fetch him back. He would say good riddance and forget him!

But the thought fretted him. Suppose Maw urged him? Suppose Montgomery wouldn't forget an insult and would go to

any trouble to “get even”?

He headed back, still swinging wide of the house, and cut across the slopes toward the right of way of the C.S.&E.

2
GOOD SAMARITAN

He wished for a light, but its lack did not bother him much. He knew this country, every slope, almost every tree. He stayed high, working along the hillside, until he reached the exit ring where the trains jumped the gap, and there he came out on the road used by the ring road's maintenance crews. He sat down and put on his shoes.

The maintenance road was no more than a track cut through trees; it was suited to tractor treads but not to wheels. But it led down across the gap and up to where the ring road disappeared in the runnel through the far ridge. He followed it, making good time in the born mountaineer's easy, loose-jointed walk.

Seventy minutes later, he was across the gap and passing under the entrance ring. He went on until he was near the ring that marked the black entrance to the tunnel. He stopped at what he judged to be a safe distance and considered his chances.

The ridge was high, else the rings would have been built in a cut rather than a tunnel. He had often hunted on it and knew that it would take two hours to climb it—in daylight. But the maintenance road ran right through the hill, under the rings. If he followed it, he could go through in ten or fifteen minutes.

Max had never been through the ridge. Legally it was trespass—not that that bothered him, he was trespassing now. Occasionally a hog or a wild animal would wander into the tunnel and be trapped there when a train hurtled through. They died, instantly and without a scratch. Once Max had spotted the carcass of a fox just inside the tunnel and had ducked in and salvaged it. There were no marks on it, but when he skinned it he found that it was a mass of tiny hemorrhages. Several years earlier, a man had been caught inside; the maintenance crew brought out the body.

The tunnel was larger than the rings but no larger than necessary to permit the projectile to ride ahead of its own reflected shock wave. Anything alive in the tunnel could not avoid the wave; that unbearable thunderclap, painful at a distance, was so loaded with energy as to be quick death close up.

But Max did not want to climb the ridge; he went over the evening schedule of trains in his mind. The *Tomahawk* was the one he had watched at sundown; the *Javelin* he had heard while he was hiding in the barn. The *Assegai* must have gone by quite a while ago though he didn't remember hearing it; that left only the midnight *Cleaver.* He then looked at the sky.

Venus had set, of course, but he was surprised to see Mars still in the west. The Moon had not risen. Let's see—full moon was last Wednesday. Surely …

The answer he got seemed wrong, so he checked himself by taking a careful eyesight of Vega and compared it with what the Big Dipper told him. Then he whistled softly—despite everything that had happened it was only ten o'clock, give or take five minutes; the stars could not be wrong. In which case, the *Assegai* was not due for another three-quarters of an hour. Except for the faint chance of a special train, he had plenty of time.

He headed into the tunnel. He had not gone fifty yards before he began to be sorry and a bit panicky; it was as dark as a sealed coffin. But the going was much easier as the bore was lined to permit smooth shock-wave reflections. He had been on his way several minutes, feeling each step but hurrying, when his eyes, adjusting to complete darkness, made out a faint grey circle far ahead. He broke into a trot and then into a dead run as his fear of the place piled up.

He reached the far end with throat burned dry and heart laboring; there he plunged downhill regardless of the sudden roughening of his path as he left the tunnel and hit the maintenance track. He did not slow up until he stood under stilt supports so high that the ring above looked small. There he stood still and fought to catch his breath.

He was slammed forward and knocked off his feet.

He picked himself up groggily, eventually remembered where he was and realized that he had been knocked cold. There was blood on one cheek and his hands and elbows were raw. It was not until he noticed these that he realized what had happened; a train had passed right over him.

It had not been close enough to kill, but it had been close enough to blast him off his feet. It could not have been the *Assegai;* he looked again at the stars and confirmed it. No, it must have been a special—and he had beaten it out of the tunnel by about a minute.

He began to shake and it was minutes before he pulled

himself together, after which he started down the maintenance road as fast as his bruised body could manage. Presently, he became aware of an odd fact; the night was silent.

But night is never silent. His ears, tuned from babyhood to the sounds and signs of his hills, should have heard an endless pattern of little night noises—wind in the leaves, the scurrying of his small cousins, tree frogs, calls of insects, owls.

By brutal logic he concluded correctly that he could not hear — "deef as a post"—the shock wave had left him deaf. But there was no way to help it, so he went on; it did not occur to him to return home. At the bottom of this draw, where the stilts were nearly three hundred feet high, the maintenance road crossed a farm road. He turned down hill onto it, having accomplished his first purpose of getting into territory where Montgomery would be less likely to look for him. He was in another watershed now; although still only a few miles from home, nevertheless by going through the ridge he had put himself into a different neighborhood.

He continued downhill for a couple of hours. The road was hardly more than a cart track but it was easier than the maintenance road. Somewhere below, when the hills gave way to the valley where the "foreigners" lived, he would find the freight highway that paralleled the ring road on the route to Earthport—Earthport being his destination although he had only foggy plans as to what he would do when he got there.

The Moon was behind him now and he made good time. A rabbit hopped onto the road ahead, sat up and stared, then skittered away. Seeing it, he regretted not having brought along his squirrel gun. Sure, it was worn out and not worth much and lately it had gotten harder and harder to buy the slugs thrown by the obsolete little weapon—but rabbit in the pot right now would go mighty nice, mighty nice! He realized that he was not only weary but terribly hungry. He had just picked at his supper and it looked like he'd breakfast on his upper lip.

Shortly, his attention was distracted from hunger to a ringing in his ears, a ringing that got distressingly worse. He shook his head and pounded his ears but it did not help; he had to make up his mind to ignore it. After another half mile or so he suddenly noticed that he could hear himself walking. He stopped dead, then clapped his hands together. He could hear them smack, cutting through the phantom ringing. With a lighter heart he went on.

At last, he came out on a shoulder that overlooked the broad

valley. In the moonlight, he could make out the sweep of the freight highway leading southwest and could detect, he thought, its fluorescent traffic guide lines. He hurried on down.

He was nearing the highway and could hear the rush of passing freighters when he spotted a light ahead. He approached it cautiously, determined that it was neither vehicle nor farm house. Closer approach showed it to be a small open fire, visible from uphill but shielded from the highway by a shoulder of limestone. A man was squatting over it, stirring the contents of a can resting on rocks over the fire.

Max crept nearer until he was looking down into the hobo jungle. He got a whiff of the stew and his mouth watered. Caught between hunger and a hill-man's ingrown distrust of "foreigners," he lay still and stared.

Presently, the man set the can off the fire and called out, "Well, don't hide there! Come on down." Max was too startled to answer. The man added, "Come on down into the light. I won't fetch it up to you." Max got to his feet and shuffled down into the circle of firelight. The man looked up. "Howdy. Draw up a chair."

"Howdy." Max sat down across the fire from the tramp. He was not even as well dressed as Max and he needed a shave. Nevertheless, he wore his rags with a jaunty air and handled himself with a sparrow's cockiness.

The man continued to stir the mess in the can then spooned out a sample, blew on it, and tasted it. "About right," he announced. "Four-day mulligan, just getting ripe. Find yourself a dish." He got up and picked over a pile of smaller cans behind him, selected one. Max hesitated, then did the same, settling on one that had once contained coffee and appeared not to have been used since. His host served him a liberal portion of stew, then handed him a spoon. Max looked at it.

"If you don't trust the last man who used it," the man said reasonably, "hold it in the fire, then wipe it. Me, I don't worry. If a bug bites me, he dies horribly." Max took the advice, holding the spoon in the flames until the handle became too hot, then wiped it on his shirt.

The stew was good and his hunger made it superlative. The gravy was thick, there were vegetables and unidentified meat. Max didn't bother his head about the pedigrees of the materials; he simply enjoyed it. After a while his host said, "Seconds?"

"Huh? Sure. Thanks!"

The second can of stew filled him up and spread through his

tissues a warm glow of well-being. He stretched lazily, enjoying his fatigue. “Feel better?” the man asked.

“Gee, yes. Thanks.”

“By the way, you can call me Sam.”

“Oh, my name is Max.”

“Glad to know you, Max.”

Max waited before raising a point that had been bothering him. “Uh, Sam? How did you know I was there? Did you hear me?”

Sam grinned. “No. But you were silhouetted against the sky. Don’t ever do that, lad, or it may be the last thing you do.”

Max twisted around and looked up at where he had lurked. Sure enough, Sam was right. He’d be dogged!

Sam added, “Traveled far?”

“Huh? Yeah, quite a piece.”

“Going far?”

“Uh, pretty far, I guess.”

Sam waited, then said, “Think your folks’ll miss you?”

“Huh? How did you know?”

“That you had run away from home? Well, you have, haven’t you?”

“Yeah. Yeah, I guess I have.”

“You looked beat when you dragged in here. Maybe it’s not too late to kill the goose before your bridges are burned. Think about it, kid. It’s rough on the road. I know.”

“Go back? I won’t ever go back!”

“As bad as that?”

Max stared into the fire. He needed badly to get his thoughts straight, even if it meant telling a foreigner his private affairs—and this soft-spoken stranger was easy to talk to. “See here, Sam, did you ever have a stepmother?”

“Eh? Can’t remember that I ever had any. The Central Jersey Development Center for State Children used to kiss me good night.”

“Oh.” Max blurted out his story with an occasional sympathetic question from Sam to straighten out its confusion. “So I lit out,” he concluded. “There wasn’t anything else to do. Was there?”

Sam pursed his lips. “I reckon not. This double stepfather of yours—he sounds like a mouse studying to be a rat. You’re well shut of him.”

“You don’t think they’ll try to find me and haul me back, do you?”

Sam stopped to put a piece of wood on the fire. “I am not sure about that.”

“Huh? Why not? I’m no use to him. He doesn’t like me. And Maw won’t care, not really. She may whine a bit, but she won’t turn her hand.”

“Well, there’s the farm.”

“The farm? I don’t care about that, not with Dad gone. Truthfully, it ain’t much. You break your back trying to make a crop. If the Food Conservation Act hadn’t forbidden owners to let farm land fall out of use, Dad would have quit farming long ago. It would take something like this government condemnation to make it possible to find anybody to take it off your hands.”

“That’s what I mean. This joker got your mother to sell it. Now my brand of law may not be much good, but it looks as if that money ought to come to you.”

“What? Oh, I don’t care about the money. I just want to get away from them.”

“Don’t talk that way about money; the powers-that-be will have you shut up for blasphemy. But it probably doesn’t matter how you feel, as I think Citizen Montgomery is going to want to see you awful bad.”

“Why?”

“Did your father leave a will?”

“No. Why? He didn’t have anything to leave but the farm.”

“I don’t know the ins and outs of your state laws, but it’s a sure thing that at least half of that farm belongs to you. Possibly your stepmother has only lifetime tenure in her half, with reversion to you when she dies. But it’s a certainty that she can’t grant a good deed without your signature. Along about time your county courthouse opens up tomorrow morning, the buyers are going to find that out. Then they’ll come high-tailing up, looking for her—and you. And ten minutes later this Montgomery hombre will start looking for you, if he hasn’t already.”

“Oh, me! If they find me, can they make me go back?”

“Don’t let them find you. You’ve made a good start.”

Max picked up his rucksack. “I guess I had better get moving. Thanks a lot, Sam. Maybe I can help you someday.”

“Sit down.”

“Look, I had better get as far away as I can.”

“Kid, you’re tired out and your judgment has slipped. How far can you walk tonight, the shape you’re in? Tomorrow morning,

bright and early, well go down to the highway, follow it about a mile to the freighters' restaurant south of here and catch the haulers as they come out from breakfast, feeling good. We'll promote a ride and you'll go farther in ten minutes than you could make all night."

Max had to admit that he was tired, exhausted really, and Sam certainly knew more about these wrinkles than he did. Sam added, "Got a blanket in your bindle?"

"No. Just a shirt … and some books."

"Books, eh? Read quite a bit myself, when I get a chance. May I see them?"

Somewhat reluctantly, Max got them out. Sam held them close to the fire and examined them. "Well, I'll be a three-eyed Martian! Kid, do you know what you've got here?"

"Sure."

"But you ought not to have these. You're not a member of the Astrogators' Guild."

"No, but my uncle was. He was on the first trip to Beta Hydrae," he added proudly.

"No foolin'!"

"Sure as taxes."

"But you've never been in space yourself? No, of course not."

"But I'm going to be!" Max admitted something that he had never told anyone, his ambition to emulate his uncle and go out to the stars. Sam listened thoughtfully. When Max stopped, he said slowly, "So you want to be an astrogator?"

"I certainly do."

Sam scratched his nose. "Look, kid, I don't want to throw cold water, but you know how the world wags. Getting to be an astrogator is almost as difficult as getting into the Plumbers' Guild. The soup is thin these days and there isn't enough to go around. The guild won't welcome you just because you are anxious to be apprenticed. Membership is hereditary, just like all the other high-pay guilds."

"But my uncle was a member."

"Your uncle isn't your father."

"No, but a member who hasn't any sons gets to nominate someone else. Uncle Chet explained it to me. He always told me he was going to register my nomination."

"And did he?"

Max was silent. At the time his uncle had died he had been too young to know how to go about finding out. When his father had followed his uncle events had closed in on him—he had

never checked up, subconsciously preferring to nurse the dream rather than test it. “I don’t know,” he said at last. “I’m going to the Mother Chapter at Earthport and find out.”

“Hmmm—I wish you luck, kid.” He stared into the fire, sadly it seemed to Max. “Well, I’m going to grab some shut-eye, and you had better do the same. If you’re chilly, you’ll find some truck back under that rock shelf—burlap and packing materials and such. It’ll keep you warm, if you don’t mind risking a flea or two.”

Max crawled into the dark hole indicated, found a half-way cave in the limestone. Groping, he located the primitive bedding. He had expected to be wakeful, but he was asleep before Sam finished covering the fire.

He was awakened by sunlight blazing outside. He crawled out, stood up and stretched the stiffness out of his limbs. By the sun, he judged it to be about seven o’clock in the morning. Sam was not in sight. He looked around and shouted, not too loudly, and guessed that Sam had gone down to the creek for a drink and a cold wash. Max went back into the shelter and hauled out his rucksack, intending to change his socks.

His uncle’s books were missing.

There was a note on top of his spare shirt: “Dear Max,” it said, “There is more stew in the can. You can warm it up for breakfast. So long—Sam P.S. Sorry.”

Further search disclosed that his identification card was missing, but Sam had not bothered with his other pitiful possessions. Max did not touch the stew but set out down the road, his mind filled with bitter thoughts.

3
EARTHPORT

The farm road crossed under the freight highway; Max came up on the far side and headed south beside the highway. The route was marked by “no trespass” signs, but the path was well-worn. The highway widened to make room for a deceleration strip. At the end of its smooth reach, a mile away, Max could see the restaurant Sam had mentioned.

He shinnied over the fence enclosing the restaurant and parking grounds and went to the parking stalls where a dozen of the big land ships were lined up. One was quivering for departure, its flat bottom a few inches clear of the metallic pavement. Max went to its front end and looked up at the driver’s compartment The door was open and he could see the driver at his instrument board. Max called out, “Hey, Mister!”

The driver stuck his head out. “What’s itching you?”

“How are the chances of a lift south?”

“Beat it, kid.” The door slammed.

None of the other freighters was raised off the pavement; their control compartments were empty. Max was about to turn away when another giant scooted down the braking strip, reached the parking space, crawled slowly into a stall, and settled to the ground. He considered approaching its driver, but decided to wait until the man had eaten. He went back toward the restaurant building and was looking through the door, watching hungry men demolish food while his mouth watered, when he heard a pleasant voice at his shoulder.

“Excuse me, but you’re blocking the door.”

Max jumped aside. “Oh! Sorry.”

“Go ahead. You were first.” The speaker was a man about ten years older than Max. He was profusely freckled and had a one-sided grin. Max saw on his cap the pin of the Teamsters’ Guild. “Go on in,” the man repeated, “before you get trampled in the rush.”

Max had been telling himself that he might catch Sam inside —and, after all, they couldn’t charge him just for coming in, if he didn’t actually *eat* anything. Underlying was the thought of asking to work for a meal, if the manager looked friendly. The freckled-faced man’s urging tipped the scales; he followed his

nose toward the source of the heavenly odors pouring out the door.

The restaurant was crowded; there was one vacant table, for two. The man slid into a chair and said, “Sit down.” When Max hesitated, he added, “Go ahead, put it down. Never like to eat alone.” Max could feel the manager’s eyes on him, he sat down. A waitress handed them each a menu and the hauler looked her over appreciatively. When she left he said, “This dump used to have automatic service—and it went broke. The trade went to the *Tivoli,* eighty miles down the stretch. Then the new owner threw away the machinery and hired girls and business picked up. Nothing makes food taste better than having a pretty girl put it in front of you. Right?”

“Uh, I guess so. Sure.” Max had not heard what was said. He had seldom been in a restaurant and then only in the lunch counter at Clyde’s Corners. The prices he read frightened him; he wanted to crawl under the table.

His companion looked at him. “What’s the trouble, chum?”

“Trouble? Uh, nothing.”

“You broke?” Max’s miserable expression answered him. “Shucks, I’ve been there myself. Relax.” The man waggled his fingers at the waitress. “Come here, honey chile. My partner and I will each have a breakfast steak with a fried egg sitting on top and this and that on the side. I want that egg to be just barely dead. If it is cooked solid, I’ll nail it to the wall as a warning to others. Understand me?”

“I doubt if you’ll be able to get a nail through it,” she retorted and walked away, swaying gently. The hauler kept his eyes on her until she disappeared into the kitchen. “See what I mean? How can machinery compete?”

The steak was good and the egg was not congealed. The hauler told Max to call him “Red” and Max gave his name in exchange. Max was pursuing the last of the yolk with a bit of toast and was considering whether it was time to broach the subject of a ride when Red leaned forward and spoke softly. “Max—you got anything pushing you? Free to take a job?”

“What? Why, maybe. What is it?”

“Mind taking a little run southwest?”

“Southwest? Matter of fact, I was headin’ that way.”

“Good. Here’s the deal. The Man says we have to have two teamsters to each rig—or else break for eight hours after driving eight. I can’t; I’ve got a penalty time to meet—and my partner washed out. The flathead got taken drunk and I had to put him

down to cool. Now I've got a check-point to pass a hundred thirty miles down the stretch. They'll make me lay over if I can't show another driver."

"Gee! But I don't know how to drive, Red. I'm awful sorry."

Red gestured with his cup. "You won't have to. You'll always be the off-watch driver. I wouldn't trust little *Molly Malone* to somebody who didn't know her ways, I'll keep myself awake with Pep pills and catch up on sleep at Earthport."

"You're going all the way to *Earthport?*"

"Right."

"It's a deal!"

"Okay, here's the lash up. Every time we hit a check-point, you're in the bunk, asleep. You help me load and unload—I've got a partial and a pick-up at Oke City—and I'll feed you. Right?"

"Right!"

"Then let's go. I want to scoot before these other dust jumpers get underway. Never can tell, there might be a spotter." Red flipped a bill down and did not wait for change.

The *Molly Malone* was two hundred feet long and streamlined such that she had negative lift when cruising. This came to Max's attention from watching the instruments; when she first quivered and raised, the dial marked "road clearance" showed nine inches, but as they gathered speed down the acceleration strip it decreased to six.

"The repulsion works by an inverse-cube law," Red explained. "The more the wind pushes us down, the harder the road pushes us up. Keeps us from jumping over the skyline. The faster we go, the steadier we are."

"Suppose you went so fast that the wind pressure forced the bottom down to the road? Could you stop soon enough to keep from wrecking it?"

"Use your head. The more we squat, the harder we are pushed up—inverse-cube, I said."

"Oh." Max got out his uncle's slide rule. "If she just supports her own weight at nine inches clearance, then at three inches the repulsion would be twenty-seven times her weight and at an inch it would be seven hundred and twenty-nine, and at a quarter of an inch—"

"Don't even think about it. At top speed I can't get her down to five inches."

"But what makes her go?"

"It's a phase relationship. The field crawls forward and Molly

tries to catch up—only she can't. Don't ask me the theory, I just push the buttons." Red struck a cigarette and lounged back, one hand on the tiller. "Better get in the bunk, kid. Check-point in forty miles."

The bunk was thwartships abaft the control compartment, a shelf above the seat. Max climbed in and wrapped a blanket around himself. Red handed him a cap. "Pull this down over your eyes. Let the button show." The button was a teamster's shield, Max did as he was told.

Presently, he heard the sound of wind change from a soft roar to a sigh and then stop. The freighter settled to the pavement and the door opened. He lay still, unable to see what was going on. A strange voice said, "How long you been herding it?"

"Since breakfast at Tony's."

"So? How did your eyes get so bloodshot?"

"It's the evil life I lead. Want to see my tongue?"

The inspector ignored this, saying instead, "Your partner didn't sign his trick."

"Whatever you say. Want me to wake the dumb geek?"

"Umm … don't bother. You sign for him. Tell him to be more careful."

"Right."

The Molly Malone pulled out and picked up speed. Max crawled down. "I thought we were sunk when he asked for my signature."

"That was on purpose," Red said scornfully. "You have to give them something to yap about, or they'll dig for it."

Max liked the freighter. The tremendous speed so close to the ground exhilarated him; he decided that if he could not be a spaceman, this life would not be bad—he'd find out how high the application fee was and start saving. He liked the easy way Red picked out on the pavement ahead the speed line that matched the *Molly*'s speed and then laid the big craft into a curve. It was usually the outermost line, with the *Molly* on her side and the horizon tilted up at a crazy angle.

Near Oklahoma City they swooped under the ring guides of the C.S.&E. just as a train went over—the *Razor*, by Max's calculations. "I used to herd those things," Red remarked, glancing up.

"You did?"

"Yep. But they got to worrying me. I hated it every time I made a jump and felt the weight sag out from under me. Then I got a notion that the train had a mind of its own and was just

waiting to turn aside instead of entering the next guide ring. That sort of thing is no good. So I found a teamster who wanted to better himself and paid the fine to both guilds to let us swap. Never regretted it. Two hundred miles an hour when you're close to the ground is enough."

"Uh, how about space ships?"

"That's another matter. Elbow room out there. Say, kid, while you're at Earthport you should take a look at the big babies. They're quite something."

The library book had been burning a hole in his rucksack; at Oklahoma City he noticed a postal box at the freight depot and, on impulse, dropped the book into it. After he had mailed it, he had a twinge of worry that he might have given a clue to his whereabouts which would get back to Montgomery, but he suppressed the worry—the book had to be returned. Vagrancy in the eyes of the law had not worried him, nor trespass, nor impersonating a licensed teamster—but filching a book was a sin.

Max was asleep in the bunk when they arrived. Red shook him. "End of the line, kid."

Max sat up, yawning. "Where are we?"

"Earthport. Let's shake a leg and get this baby unloaded."

It was two hours past sunrise and growing desert hot by the time they got the *Molly* disgorged. Red stood him to a last meal. Red finished first, paid, then laid a bill down by Max's plate. "Thanks, kid. That's for luck. So long." He was gone while Max still had his mouth hanging open. He had never learned his friend's name, did not even know his shield number.

Earthport was much the biggest settlement Max had ever seen and everything about it confused him—the hurrying self-centered crowds, the enormous buildings, the slidewalks in place of streets, the noise, the desert sun beating down, the flatness—why, there wasn't anything you could call a hill closer than the skyline!

He saw his first extraterrestrial, an eight-foot native of Epsilon Gemini V, striding out of a shop with a package under his left arms—as casually, Max thought, as a famer doing his week's shopping at the Corners. Max stared. He knew what the creature was from pictures and SV shows, but seeing one was another matter. Its multiple eyes, like a wreath of yellow grapes around the head, gave it a grotesque faceless appearance. Max let his own head swivel to follow it.

The creature approached a policeman, tapped the top of his

cap, and said, “Excuse me, sahr, but can you tirect me to the Tesert Palms Athletic Club?” Max could not tell where the noise came out.

Max finally noticed that he seemed to be the only one staring, so he walked slowly on, while sneaking looks over his shoulder —which resulted in his bumping into a stranger. “Oh, excuse me!” Max blurted. The stranger looked at him. “Take it easy, cousin. You’re in the big city now.” After that he tried to be careful.

He had intended to seek out the Guild Hall of the Mother Chapter of Astrogators at once in the forlorn hope that even without his books and identification card he might still identify himself and find that Uncle Chet had provided for his future. But there was so much to see that he loitered. He found himself presently in front of Imperial House, the hotel that guaranteed to supply any combination of pressure, temperature, lighting, atmosphere, pseudogravitation, and diet favored by any known race of intelligent creatures. He hung around hoping to see some of the guests, but the only one who came out while he was there was wheeled out in a pressurized travel tank and he could not see into it.

He noticed the police guard at the door eyeing him and started to move on—then decided to ask directions, reasoning that if it was all right for a Geminian to question a policeman, it certainly must be all right for a human being. He found himself quoting the extra-terrestrial. “Excuse me, sir, but could you direct me to the Astrogators’ Guild Hall?”

The officer looked him over. “At the foot of the Avenue of Planets, just before you reach the port.”

“Uh, which way do …”

“New in town?”

“Yeah. Yes, sir.”

“Where are you staying?”

“Staying? Why, nowhere yet. I just got here. I …”

“What’s your business at the Astrogators’ Hall?”

“It’s on account of my uncle,” Max answered miserably.

“Your uncle?”

“He … he’s an astrogator.” He mentally crossed his fingers over the tense.

The policeman inspected again. “Take this slide to the next intersection, change and slide west. Big building with the guild sunburst over the door—can’t miss it. Stay out of restricted areas.” Max left without waiting to find out how he was to

know a restricted area. The Guild Hall did prove easy to find; the slidewalk to the west ducked underground and when it emerged at its swing-around Max was deposited in front of it.

But he had not eyes for it. To the west where avenue and buildings ended was the field and on it space ships, stretching away for miles—fast little military darts, stubby Moon shuttles, winged ships that served the satellite stations, robot freighters, graceless and powerful. But directly in front of the gate hardly half a mile away was a great ship that he knew at once, the starship *Asgard*. He knew her history. Uncle Chet had served in her. A hundred years earlier she had been built out in space as a space-to-space rocket ship; she was then the *Prince of Wales*. Years passed, her tubes were ripped out and a mass-conversion torch was kindled in her; she became the *Einstein*. More years passed, for nearly twenty she swung empty around Luna, a lifeless, outmoded hulk. Now in place of the torch she had Horst-Conrad impellers that clutched at the fabric of space itself; thanks to them she was now able to touch Mother Terra. To commemorate her rebirth she had been dubbed *Asgard*, heavenly home of the gods.

Her massive, pear-shaped body was poised on its smaller end, steadied by an invisible scaffolding of thrust beams. Max knew where they must be, for there was a ring of barricades spotted around her to keep the careless from wandering into the deadly loci.

He pressed his nose against the gate to the field and tried to see more of her, until a voice called out, “Away from there, Jack! Don’t you see that sign?”

Max looked up. Above his head was a sign: restricted area. Reluctantly he moved away and walked back to the Guild Hall.

4
THE ASTROGATORS' GUILD

Everything about the hall of the Mother Chapter was to Max's eyes lavish, churchlike, and frightening. The great doors opened silently as he approached, dilating away into the walls. His feet made no sound on the tesselated floor. He started down the long, high foyer, wondering where he should go, when a firm voice stopped him. "May I help you, please?"

He turned. A beautiful young lady with a severe manner held him with her eye. She was seated behind a desk. Max went up to her. "Uh, maybe you could tell me, Ma'am, who I ought to see. I don't rightly know just …"

"One moment. Your name, please?" Several minutes later she had wormed out of him the basic facts of his quest. "So far as I can see, you haven't any status here and no excuse for appealing to the Guild."

"But I told you …"

"Never mind. I'm going to put it up to the legal office." She touched a button and a screen raised up on her desk; she spoke to it. "Mr. Hanson, can you spare a moment?"

"Yes, Grace?"

"There is a young man here who claims to be a legacy of the Guild. Will you talk with him?"

The voice answered, "Look, Grace, you know the procedures. Get his address, send him on his way, and send his papers up for consideration."

She frowned and touched another control. Although Max could see that she continued to talk, no sound reached him. Then she nodded and the screen slid back into the desk. She touched another button and said, "Skeeter!"

A page boy popped out of a door behind her and looked Max over with cold eyes. "Skeeter," she went on, "take this visitor to Mr. Hanson."

The page sniffed. "Him?"

"Him. And fasten your collar and spit out that gum."

Mr. Hanson listened to Max's story and passed him on to his boss, the chief legal counsel, who listened to a third telling. That official then drummed his desk and made a call, using the

silencing device the girl had used.

He then said to Max, “You’re in luck, son. The Most Worthy High Secretary will grant you a few minutes of his time. Now when you go in, don’t sit down, remember to speak only when spoken to, and get out quickly when he indicates that the audience is ended.”

The High Secretary’s office made the lavishness that had thus far filled Max’s eyes seem like austerity. The rug alone could have been swapped for the farm on which Max grew up. There was no communication equipment in evidence, no files, not even a desk. The High Secretary lounged back in a mammoth easy chair while a servant massaged his scalp. He raised his head as Max appeared and said, “Come in, son. Sit down there. What is your name?”

“Maximilian Jones, sir.”

They looked at each other. The Secretary saw a lanky youth who needed a haircut, a bath, and a change of clothes; Max saw a short, fat little man in a wrinkled uniform. His head seemed too big for him and Max could not make up his mind whether the eyes were kindly or cold.

“And you are a nephew of Chester Arthur Jones?”

“Yes, sir.”

“I knew Brother Jones well. A fine mathematician.” The High Secretary went on, “I understand that you have had the misfortune to lose your government Citizen’s Identification. Carl.”

He had not raised his voice, but a young man appeared with the speed of a genie. “Yes, sir?”

“Take this young man’s thumb print, call the Bureau of Identification—not here, but the main office at New Washington. My compliments to the Chief of Bureau and tell him that I would be pleased to have immediate identification while you hold the circuit.”

The print was taken speedily; the man called Carl left. The High Secretary went on, “What was your purpose in coming here?” Diffidently, Max explained that his uncle had told him that he intended to nominate him for apprenticeship in the guild.

The man nodded. “So I understand. I am sorry to tell you, young fellow, that Brother Jones made no nomination.”

Max had difficulty in taking in the simple statement. So much was his inner pride tied to his pride in his uncle’s profession, so much had he depended on his hope that his uncle had named

him his professional heir, that he could not accept at once the verdict that he was nobody and nothing. He blurted out, “You’re *sure?* Did you look?”

The masseur looked shocked but the High Secretary answered calmly, “The archives have been searched, not once, but twice. There is no possible doubt.” The High Secretary sat up, gestured slightly, and the servant disappeared. “I’m sorry.”

“But he *told* me,” Max said stubbornly. “He said he was going to.”

“Nevertheless, he did not.” The man who had taken the thumb print came in and offered a memorandum to the High Secretary, who glanced at it and waved it away. “I’ve no doubt that he considered you. Nomination to our brotherhood involves a grave responsibility; it is not unusual for a childless brother to have his eye on a likely lad for a long time before deciding whether or not he measures up. For some reason your uncle did not name you.”

Max was appalled by the humiliating theory that his beloved uncle might have found him unworthy. It could not be true—why, just the day before he died, he had said—he interrupted his thoughts to say, “Sir—I think I know what happened.”

“Eh?”

“Uncle Chester died suddenly. He meant to name me, but he didn’t get a chance. I’m sure of it.”

“Possibly. Men have been known to fail to get their affairs in order before the last orbit. But I must assume that he knew what he was doing.”

“But—”

“That’s all, young man. No, don’t go away. I’ve been thinking about you today.” Max looked startled, the High Secretary smiled and continued, “You see, you are the second ‘Maximilian Jones’ who has come to us with this story.”

“Huh?”

“Huh indeed.” The guild executive reached into a pocket of his chair, pulled out some books and a card, handed them to Max, who stared unbelievingly.

“Uncle Chet’s books!”

“Yes. Another man, older than yourself, came here yesterday with your identification card and these books. He was less ambitious than you are,” he added dryly. “He was willing to settle for a rating less lofty than astrogator.”

“What happened?”

“He left suddenly when we attempted to take his fingerprints.

I did not see him. But when you showed up today, I began to wonder how long a procession of 'Maximilian Jones' would favor us. Better guard that card in the future—I fancy we have saved you a fine."

Max placed it in an inner pocket. "Thanks a lot, sir." He started to put the books in his rucksack. The High Secretary gestured in denial.

"No, no! Return the books, please."

"But Uncle Chet gave them to me."

"Sorry. At most he loaned them to you—and he should not have done even that. The tools of our profession are never owned individually; they are loaned to each brother. Your uncle should have turned them in when he retired, but some of the brothers have a sentimental fondness for having them in their possession. Give them to me, please."

Max still hesitated. "Come now," the guildsman said reasonably. "It would not do for our professional secrets to be floating around loose, available to anyone. Even the hairdressers do not permit that. We have a high responsibility to the public. Only a member of this guild, trained, tested, sworn, and accepted, may lawfully be custodian of those manuals."

Max's answer was barely audible. "I don't see the harm. I'm not going to get to use them, it looks like."

"You don't believe in anarchy, surely? Our whole society is founded on entrusting grave secrets only to those who are worthy. But don't feel sad. Each brother, when he is issued his tools, deposits an earnest with the bursar. In my opinion, since you are the nearest relative of Brother Jones, we may properly repay the earnest to you for their return. Carl."

The young man appeared again. "The deposit monies, please." Carl had the money with him—he seemed to earn his living by knowing what the High Secretary was about to want. Max found himself accepting an impressive sheaf of money, more than he had ever touched before, and the books were taken from him before he could think of another objection.

It seemed time to leave, but he was motioned back to his chair. "Personally, I am sorry to disappoint you, but I am merely the servant of my brothers; I have no choice. However …" The High Secretary fitted his fingertips together. "Our brotherhood takes care of its own. There are funds at my disposal for such cases. How would you like to go into training?"

"For the *Guild?"*

"No, no! We don't grant brotherhood as charity. But for some

respectable trade, metalsmith, or chef, or tailor—what you wish. Any occupation not hereditary. The brotherhood will sponsor you, pay your 'prentice fee and, if you make good, lend you your contribution when you are sworn in."

Max knew he should accept gratefully. He was being offered an opportunity free that most of the swarming masses never got on any terms. But the cross-grained quirk in him that had caused him to spurn the stew that Sam had left behind made this generous offer stick in his craw. "Thanks just the same," he answered in tones almost surly, "but I don't rightly think I can take it."

The High Secretary looked bleak. "So? It's your life." He snapped his fingers, a page appeared, and Max was led quickly out of the Hall.

He stood on the steps of the Guild Hall and wondered dejectedly what he should do next. Even the space ships on the field at the foot of the street did not attract; he could not have looked at one without feeling like crying. He looked to the east instead.

A short distance away, a jaunty figure leaned against a trash receptacle. As Max's eyes rested on the man he straightened up, flipped a cigarette to the pavement, and started toward him.

Max looked at him again. "Sam!" It was undoubtedly the wayfarer who had robbed him—well-dressed, clean shaved—but Sam nonetheless. Max hurried toward him.

"Howdy, Max," Sam greeted him with an unembarrassed grin, "how did you make out?"

"I ought to have you arrested!"

"Now, now—keep your voice down. You're making yourself conspicuous."

Max took a breath and lowered his voice. "You stole my books."

"*Your* books? They weren't yours—and I returned them to their owners. You want to arrest me for that?"

"But you … Well, anyhow you …"

A voice, civil, firm, and official, spoke at Max's elbow. "Is this person annoying you, sir?" Max turned and found a policeman standing behind him. He started to speak, then bit off the words as he realized the question had been addressed to Sam.

Sam took hold of Max's upper arm in a gesture that was protective and paternal, but quite firm. "Not at all, officer, thank you."

"Are you sure? I received word that this chico was headed

this way and I've had my eye on him."

"He's a friend of mine. I was waiting for him here."

"As you say. We have a lot of trouble with vagrants. They all seem to head for Earthport."

"He's not a vagrant. He's a young friend of mine from the country and I'm afraid he's gotten a bit confused. I'll be responsible."

"Very well, sir."

"Not at all." Max let himself be led away. When they were out of earshot Sam said, "That was close. That nosy clown would have had us both in the bull pen. You did all right, kid—kept your lip zipped at the right time."

They were around the corner into a less important street before Sam let go his grip. He stopped and faced Max, grinning. "Well, kid?"

"I should'a told that cop about you!"

"Why didn't you? He was right there."

Max found himself caught by contradictory feelings. He was angry with Sam, no doubt about it, but his first unstudied reaction at seeing him had been the warm pleasure one gets from recognizing a familiar face among strangers—the anger had come a split second later. Now Sam looked at him with easy cynicism, a quizzical smile on his face. "Well, kid?" he repeated. "If you want to turn me in, let's go back and get it over with. I won't run."

Max looked back at him peevishly. "Oh, forget it!"

"Thanks. I'm sorry about it, kid. I really am."

"Then why did you do it?"

Sam's face changed suddenly to a sad, far-away look, then resumed its cheerful cynicism. "I was tempted by an idea, old son—every man has his limits. Someday I'll tell you. Now, how about a bit to eat and a gab? There's a joint near here where we can talk without having the nosies leaning over our shoulders."

"I don't know as I want to."

"Oh, come now! The food isn't much but it's better than mulligan."

Max had been ready with a stiff speech about how he would not turn Sam in, but he certainly did not want to eat with him; the mention of mulligan brought him up short. He remembered uneasily that Sam had not inquired as to *his* morals, but had shared his food.

"Well … okay."

"That's my boy!" They went on down the street. The

neighborhood was a sort to be found near the port in any port city; once off the pompous Avenue of the Planets it became more crowded, noisier, more alive, and somehow warmer and more friendly despite a strong air of "keep your hand on your purse." Hole-in- the-wall tailor shops, little restaurants none too clean, cheap hotels, honky-tonks, fun arcades, exhibits both "educational" and "scientific," street vendors, small theaters with gaudy posters and sounds of music leaking out, shops fronting for betting parlors, tattoo parlors fronting for astrologers, and the inevitable Salvation Army mission gave the street flavor its stylish cousins lacked. Martians in trefoil sunglasses and respirators, humanoids from Beta Corvi III, things with exoskeletons from Allah knew where, all jostled with humans of all shades and all blended in easy camaraderie.

Sam stopped at a shop with the age-old symbol of three golden spheres. "Wait here. Be right out."

Max waited and watched the throng. Sam came out shortly without his coat. "Now we eat."

"Sam! Did you pawn your coat?"

"Give the man a cigar! How did you guess?"

"But … Look, I didn't know you were broke; you looked prosperous. Get it back, I'll … I'll pay for our lunch."

"Say, that's sweet of you, kid. But forget it. I don't need a coat this weather. Truth is, I was dressed up just to make a good impression at—well, a little matter of business."

Max blurted out, "But how did you …" then shut up. Sam grinned. "Did I steal the fancy rags? No. I encountered a citizen who believed in percentages and engaged him in a friendly game. Never bet on percentages, kid; skill is more fundamental. Here we are."

The room facing the street was a bar, beyond was a restaurant. Sam led him on through the restaurant, through the kitchen, down a passage off which there were card rooms, and ended in a smaller, less pretentious dining room; Sam picked a table in a corner. An enormous Samoan shuffled up, dragging one leg. Sam nodded, "Howdy, Percy." He turned to Max. "A drink first?"

"Uh, I guess not."

"Smart lad. Lay off the stuff. Irish for me, Percy, and we'll both have whatever you had for lunch." The Samoan waited silently. Sam shrugged and laid money on the table, Percy scooped it up.

Max objected, "But I was going to pay."

“You can pay for the lunch. Percy owns the place,” he added. “He’s offensively rich, but he didn’t get that way by trusting the likes of me. Now tell me about yourself, old son. How you got here? How you made out with the astrogators … everything. Did they kill the fatted calf?”

“Well, no.” There seemed to be no reason not to tell Sam and he found that he wanted to talk. Sam nodded at the end.

“About what I had guessed. Any plans now?”

“No. I don’t know what to do now, Sam.”

“Hmm … it’s an ill wind that has no turning. Eat your lunch and let me think.”

Later he added, “Max, what do you *want* to do?”

“Well … I wanted to be an astrogator …”

“That’s out.”

“I know.”

“Tell me, did you want to be an astrogator and nothing else, or did you simply want to go into space?”

“Why, I guess I never thought about it any other way.”

“Well, think about it.”

Max did so. “I want to go to space. If I can’t go as an astrogator, I want to go anyhow. But I don’t see how. The Astrogators’ Guild is the only one I stood a chance for.”

“There are ways.”

“Huh? Do you mean put in for emigration?”

Sam shook his head. “It costs more than you could save to go to one of the desirable colonies—and the ones they give you free rides to I wouldn’t wish on my worst enemies.”

“Then what do you mean?”

Sam hesitated. “There are ways to wangle it, old son—if you do what I say. This uncle of yours—you were around him a lot?”

“Why, sure.”

“Talked about space with you?”

“Certainly. That’s all we talked about.”

“Hmm … how well do you know the patter?”

5
"… YOUR MONEY AND MY KNOW-HOW …"

The patter?" Max looked puzzled. "I suppose I know what everybody knows."

"Where's the worry hole?"

"Huh? That's the control room."

"If the cheater wants a corpse, where does he find it?"

Max looked amused. "That's just stuff from SV serials, nobody talks like that aboard ship. The cook is the cook, and if he wanted a side of beef, he'd go to the reefer for it."

"How do you tell a 'beast' from an animal?"

"Why, a 'beast' is a passenger, but an animal is just an animal, I guess."

"Suppose you were on a ship for Mars and they announced that the power plant had gone blooie and the ship was going to spiral into the Sun? What would you think?"

"I'd think somebody was trying to scare me. In the first place, you wouldn't be 'on' a ship—'in' is the right word. Second, a spiral isn't one of the possible orbits. And third, if a ship was headed for Mars from Earth, it couldn't fall into the Sun; the orbit would be incompatible."

"Suppose you were part of a ship's crew in a strange port and you wanted to go out and look the place over. How would you go about asking the captain for permission?"

"Why, I wouldn't."

"You'd just jump ship?*

"Let me finish. If I wanted to hit dirt, I'd ask the first officer; the captain doesn't bother with such things. If the ship was big enough, I'd have to ask my department head first." Max sat up and held Sam's eye.

"Sam—you've been spaceside. Haven't you?"

"What gave you that notion, kid?"

"What's your guild?"

"Stow it, Max. Ask me no questions and I'll sell you no pigs in a poke. Maybe I've studied up on the jive just as you have."

"I don't believe it," Max said bluntly.

Sam looked pained. Max went on, "What's this all about? You ask me a bunch of silly questions—sure, I know quite a bit

about spaceside; I've been reading about it all my life and Uncle Chet would talk by the hour. But what of it?"

Sam looked at him and said softly, "Max—the *Asgard* is raising next Thursday—for starside. Would you like to be in her?"

Max thought about it. To be in the fabulous *Asgard,* to be heading out to the stars, to be—he brushed the vision aside. "Don't talk that way, Sam! You know I'd give my right arm. Why needle me?"

"How much money have you?"

"Huh? Why?"

"How much?"

"I haven't even had time to count it." Max started to haul out the wad of bills he had been given; Sam hastily and unobtrusively stopped him.

"Psst!" he protested. "Don't flash a roll in here. Do you want to eat through a slit in your throat? Keep it down!"

Startled, Max took the advice. He was still more startled when he finished the tally; he had known that he had been given quite a lot of money but this was more than he had dreamed. "How much?" Sam persisted. Max told him, Sam swore softly. "Well, it will just have to do."

"Do for what?"

"You'll see. Put it away."

As Max did so he said wonderingly, "Sam, I had no idea those books were so valuable."

"They aren't."

"Huh?"

"It's malarkey. Lots of guilds do it. They want to make it appear that their professional secrets are precious, so they make the candidate put up a wad of dough for his reference books. If those things were published in the ordinary way, they'd sell at a reasonable price."

"But that's right, isn't it? As the Worthy High Secretary explained, it wouldn't do for just anybody to have that knowledge."

Sam made a rude noise and pretended to spit "What difference would it make? Suppose you still had them—you don't have a ship to conn."

"But …" Max stopped and grinned. "I can't see that it did any good to take them away from me anyhow. I've read them, so I know what's in them."

"Sure you know. Maybe you even remember some of the

methods. But you don't have all those columns of figures so you can look up the one you need when you need it. That's what they care about."

"But I do! I read them, I tell you." Max wrinkled his forehead, then began to recite: "'Page 272, Calculated Solutions of the Differential Equation of Motion by the Ricardo Assumption—'" He began to reel off a series of seven-place figures. Sam listened in growing surprise, then stopped him.

"Kid, you really remember that? You weren't making it up?"

"Of course not, I *read* it."

"Well, I'll be a beat up … Look, you're a page-at-a-glance reader? Is that it?"

"No, not exactly. I'm a pretty fast reader, but I do have to read it. But I don't forget. I never have been able to see how people forget. I can't forget anything."

Sam shook his head wonderingly. "I've been able to forget a lot of things, thank Heaven." He thought for a moment. "Maybe we should forget the other caper and exploit this talent of yours. I can think of angles."

"What do you mean? And what other caper?"

"Hmm … no, I was right the first time. The idea is to get away from here. And with your funny memory the chances are a whole lot better. Even though you sling the slang pretty well I was worried. Now I'm not."

"Sam, stop talking riddles. What are you figuring on?"

"Okay, kid, I'll lay it on the table." He glanced around, leaned forward, and spoke even more quietly. "We take the money and I spread it around carefully. When the *Asgard* raises, we're signed on as crewmen."

"As apprentices? We wouldn't even have time for ground school. And besides you're too old to 'prentice."

"Use your head! We don't have enough to pay one apprentice fee, let alone two, in any space guild—and the *Asgard* isn't signing 'prentices anyhow. We'll be experienced journeymen in one of the guilds, with records to prove it."

When the idea soaked in, Max was shocked. "But they put you in jail for that!"

"Where do you think you are now?"

"Well, I'm not in jail. And I don't want to be."

"This whole planet is one big jail, and a crowded one at that. What chance have you got? If you aren't born rich, or born into one of the hereditary guilds, what can you do? Sign up with one of the labor companies."

"But there are non-hereditary guilds."

"Can you pay the fee? You've got a year, maybe two until you're too old to 'prentice. If you were sharp with cards you might manage it—but can you earn it? You should live so long! Your old man should have saved it; he left you a farm instead." Sam stopped suddenly, bit his thumb. "Max, I'll play fair. Your old man did leave you a fair start in life. With the money you've got you can go home, hire a shyster, and maybe squeeze that Montgomery item out of the money he swindled for your farm. Then you can buy your apprenticeship in some guild. Do it, kid. I won't stand in your way." He watched Max narrowly.

Max reflected that he had just refused a chance to pick a trade and be given a free start. Maybe he should reconsider. Maybe …"No! That's not what I want. This … this, uh, scheme of yours, how do we do it?"

Sam relaxed and grinned. "My boy!"

Sam got them a room over Percy's restaurant. There he coached him. Sam went out several times and Max's money went with him. When Max protested, Sam said wearily, "What do you want? To hold my heart as security? Do you want to come along and scare 'em out of the dicker? The people I have to reason with will be taking chances. Or do you think you can arrange matters yourself? It's your money and my know-how … that's the partnership."

Max watched him leave the first time with gnawing doubts, but Sam came back. Once he brought with him an elderly, gross woman who looked Max over as if he were an animal up for auction. Sam did not introduce her but said, "How about it? I thought a mustache would help."

She looked at Max from one side, then the other. "No," she decided, "that would just make him look made up for amateur theatricals." She touched Max's head with moist, cold fingers; when he drew back, she admonished, "Don't flinch, honey duck. Aunt Becky has to work on you. No, we'll move back his hair line above his temples, thin it out on top, and kill its gloss. Some faint wrinkles tattooed around his eyes. Mmm … that's all. Mustn't overdo it."

When this fat artist was through, Max looked ten years older. Becky asked if he wanted his hair roots killed, or would he prefer to have his scalp return to normal in time? Sam started to insist on permanence, but she brushed him aside. "I'll give him a bottle of 'Miracle Gro'—no extra charge, it's just rubbing

alcohol—and he can make a big thing of using it. How about it, lover? You're too pretty to age you permanently."

Max accepted the "Miracle Gro"—hair restored or your money back.

Sam took away his citizen's identification card, returned with another one. It had his right name, a wrong age, his right serial number, a wrong occupation, his own thumb print, and a wrong address. Max looked at it curiously. "It looks real."

"It should. The man who made it makes thousands of real ones—but he charges extra for this." That night Sam brought him a book titled *Ship Economy* and embossed with the seal of the Guild of Space Stewards, Cooks, and Pursers Clerks. "Better stay up all night and see how much you can soak up. The man it belongs to won't sleep more than ten hours even with the jolt Percy slipped into his nightcap. Want a pill to keep you awake?"

"I don't think so." Max examined it. It was in fine print and quite thick. But by five in the morning, he had finished it. He woke Sam and gave it back, then went to sleep, his head buzzing with stowage and dunnage, moment arms and mass calculations, hydroponics techniques, cargo records, tax forms, diets, food preservation and preparation, daily, weekly, and quarterly accounts, and how to get rats out of a compartment which must not be evacuated. Simple stuff, he decided—he wondered why such things were considered too esoteric for laymen.

On the fourth day of his incarceration, Sam fitted him out with spaceside clothes, none of them new, and gave him a worn plastileather personal record book. The first page stated that he was an accepted brother of the Stewards, Cooks, and Purser's Clerks, having honorably completed his apprenticeship. It listed his skills and it appeared that his dues had been paid each quarter for seven years. What appeared to be his own signature appeared above that of the High Steward, with the seal of the guild embossed through both. The other pages recorded his trips, his efficiency ratings, and other permanent data, each properly signed by the first officers and pursers concerned. He noted with interest that he had been fined three days' pay in the *Cygnus* for smoking in an unauthorized place and that he had once for six weeks been allowed to strike for chartsman, having paid the penalty to the Chartsmen & Computers Guild for the chance.

"See anything odd?" asked Sam.

"It all looks funny to me."

“It says you’ve been to Luna. Everybody’s been to Luna. But the ships you served in are mostly out of commission and none of the pursers happens to be in Earthport now. The only starship you ever jumped in was lost on the trip immediately after the one you took. Get me?”

“I think so.”

“When you talk to another spaceman, no matter what ship he served in, it’s not one you served in—you won’t be showing this record to anybody but the purser and your boss anyhow.”

“But suppose *they* served in one of these?”

“Not in the *Asgard.* We made darn sure. Now I’m going to take you out on an evening of gaiety. You’ll drink warm milk on account of your ulcer and you’ll complain when you can’t get it. And that’s just about all you’ll talk about—your symptoms. You’ll start a reputation right now for being untalkative; you can’t make many mistakes with your mouth shut. Watch yourself, kid, there will be spacemen around you all evening. If you mess it up, I’ll leave you dirtside and raise without you. Let me see you walk again.”

Max walked for him. Sam cursed gently. “Gripes, you still walk like a farmer. Get your feet out of those furrows, boy.”

“No good?”

“It’ll have to do. Grab your bonnet. Well strike while the iron’s in the fire and let the bridges fall where they may.”

6
“SPACEMAN” JONES

The *Asgard* was to raise the next day. Max woke early and tried to wake Sam, but this proved difficult. At last the older man sat up. “Oh, what a head! What time is it?”

“About six.”

“And you woke me? Only my feeble condition keeps me from causing you to join your ancestors. Go back to sleep.”

“But today’s the day!”

“Who cares? She raises at noon. We’ll sign on at the last minute; that way you won’t have time to make a slip.”

“Sam? *How do you know they’ll take us?”*

“Oh, for Pete’s sake! It’s all arranged. Now shut up. Or go downstairs and get breakfast—but don’t talk to anybody. If you’re a pal, you’ll bring me a pot of coffee at ten o’clock.”

“And breakfast?”

“Don’t mention food in my presence. Show some respect.” Sam pulled the covers up over his head.

It was nearly eleven thirty when they presented themselves at the gate of the port; ten minutes later before the bus deposited them at the base of the ship. Max looked up at its great, bulging sides but was cut short by a crewman standing at the lift and holding a list. “Names.”

“Anderson.”

“Jones.”

He checked them off. “Get in the ship. You should have been here an hour ago.” The three climbed into the cage; it swung clear of the ground and was reeled in, swaying, like a bucket on a well rope.

Sam looked down and shuddered. “Never start a trip feeling good,” he advised Max. “It might make you sorry to be leaving.” The cage was drawn up inside the ship; the lock closed after them and they stepped out into the *Asgard.* Max was trembling with stage fright.

He had expected to be sworn into the ship’s company by the first officer, as called for by law. But his reception was depressingly unceremonious. The crewman who had checked them into the ship told them to follow him; he led them to the Purser’s office. There the Chief Clerk had them sign and

thumbprint the book, yawning the while and tapping his buck teeth. Max surrendered his forged personal record book, while feeling as if the deception were stamped on it in bold letters. But Mr. Kuiper merely chucked it into a file basket. He then turned to them. “This is a taut ship. You’ve started by very nearly missing it. That’s a poor start.”

Sam said nothing. Max said, “Yessir.”

The Chief Clerk went on, “Stow your gear, get your chow, and report back.” He glanced at a wall chart. “One of you in D-112, the other in E-009.”

Max started to ask how to get there, but Sam took his elbow and eased him out of the office. Outside he said, “Don’t ask any questions you can avoid. We’re on Baker deck, that’s all we need to know.” Presently, they came to a companionway and started back down. Max felt a sudden change in pressure, Sam grinned. “She’s sealed. Won’t be long now.”

They were in D-112, an eight-man bunkroom, and Sam was showing him how to set the lock on the one empty locker when there was a distant call on a loudspeaker. Max felt momentarily dizzy and his weight seemed to pulse. Then it stopped. Sam remarked, “They were a little slow synchronizing the field—or else this bucket of bolts has an unbalanced phaser.” He clapped Max on the back. “We made it, kid.”

They were in space.

E-009 was down one more deck and on the far side; they left Sam’s gear there and started to look for lunch. Sam stopped a passing engineer’s mate. “Hey, shipmate—we’re fresh caught. Where’s the crew’s mess?”

“Clockwise about eighty and inboard, this deck.” He looked them over. “Fresh caught, eh? Well, you’ll find out.”

“Like that, huh?”

“Worse. A madhouse squared. If I wasn’t married, I’d’a stayed dirtside.” He went on his way.

Sam said, “Ignore it, kid. All the old-timers in a ship claim it’s the worst madhouse in space. A matter of pride.” But their next experience seemed to confirm it; the serving window in the mess room had closed at noon, when the ship lifted; Max mournfully resigned himself to living with a tight belt until supper. But Sam pushed on into the galley and came out presently with two loaded trays. They found empty places and sat down.

“How did you do it?”

“Any cook will feed you if you let him explain first what a louse you are and how by rights he doesn’t have to.”

The food was good—real beef patties, vegetables from the ship’s gardens, wheat bread, a pudding, and coffee. Max polished his platter and wondered if he dared ask for seconds. He decided against it. The talk flowed around him and only once was there danger that his tyro status might show up, that being when a computerman asked him a direct question as to his last trip.

Sam stalled it off. “Imperial survey,” he answered briefly. “We’re both still covered.”

The computerman grinned knowingly. “Which jail were you in? The Imperial Council hasn’t ordered a secret survey in years.”

“This one was so secret they forgot to tell you about it. Write ’em a letter and burn them out about it,” Sam stood up. “Finished, Max?”

On the way back to the Purser’s Office, Max worried as to his probable assignment, checking over in his mind the skills and experience he was alleged to have. He need not have worried; Mr. Kuiper, with a fine disregard for such factors, assigned him as stableman.

The *Asgard* was a combined passenger liner and freighter. She carried this trip Hereford breeding stock, two bulls and two dozen cows, and an assortment of other animals consigned for ecologic and economic reasons to colonies—pigs, chickens, sheep, a pair of Angora goats, a family of llamas. It was contrary to Imperial policy to plant most terrestrial fauna on other planets; the colonials were expected to establish economy with indigenous flora and fauna—but some animals have been bred for so many generations for the use of man that they are not easily replaced by exotic creatures. On Gamma Leonis VI(b), New Mars, the saurians known locally as “chuckleheads” or “chucks” could and did replace Percherons as draft animals with greater efficiency and economy—but men disliked them. There was never the familial trust that exists between horses and men; unless a strain of chucks should develop a degree of rapport with men (which seemed unlikely), they would eventually die out and be replaced by the horse, for the unforgivable sin of failing to establish a firm treaty with the most ravenous, intolerant, deadly, and successful of the animals in the explored universe, Man.

There was also a cage of English sparrows. Max never did find

out where these noisy little scavengers were believed to be necessary, nor was he acquainted with the complex mathematical analysis by which such conclusions were reached. He simply fed them and tried to keep their quarters clean.

There were cats in the *Asgard,* too, but most of these were free citizens and crewmen, charged with holding down the rats and mice that had gone into space along with mankind. One of Max's duties was to change the sand boxes on each deck and take the soiled ones to the oxidizer for processing. The other cats were pets, property of passengers, unhappy prisoners in the kennel off the stables. The passengers' dogs lived there, too; no dogs were allowed to run free.

Max wanted to look back at Earth and see it as a shrinking globe in the sky, but that was a privilege reserved for passengers. He spent the short period when it would have been possible in hauling (by hand) green timothy hay from the hydroponics air-conditioning plant to the stables and in cleaning said stables. It was a task he neither liked nor disliked; by accident he had been assigned to work that he understood.

His immediate boss was the Chief Ship's Steward, Mr. Giordano. Mr. "Gee" split the ship's housekeeping with Mr. Dumont, Chief Passengers' Steward; their domains divided at Charlie deck. Thus Mr. Dumont had passengers' quarters, officers' country, offices, and the control and communication stations, while Giordano was responsible for everything down (or aft) to but not including the engineering space—crew's quarters, mess, and galley, stores, stables and kennel, hydroponics deck, and cargo spaces. Both worked for the Purser, who in turn was responsible to the First Officer.

The organization of starships derived in part from that of military vessels, in part from ocean liners of earlier days, and in part from the circumstances of interstellar travel. The first officer was boss of the ship and a wise captain did not interfere with him. The captain, although by law monarch of his miniature world, turned his eyes outward; the first officer turned his inward. As long as all went well the captain concerned himself only with the control room and with astrogation; the first officer bossed everything else. Even astrogators, communicators, computermen, and chartsmen were under the first officer, although in practice he had nothing to do with them when they were on duty since they worked in the "worry hole" under the captain.

The chief engineer was under the first officer, too, but he was

nearly an autonomous satrap. In a taut, well-run ship he kept his bailiwick in such shape that the first officer did not need to worry about it. The chief engineer was responsible not only for the power plant and the Horst-Conrad impellers but for all auxiliary engineering equipment wherever located—for example the pumps and fans of the hydroponics installations, even though the purser, through his chief ship's steward, took care of the farming thereof.

Such was the usual organization of starship liner-freighters and such was the *Asgard.* It was not identical with the organization of a man-of-war and very different from that of the cheerless transports used to ship convicts and paupers out to colonies that were being forced—in *those* ships, the purser's department was stripped to a clerk or two and the transportees did all the work, cooking, cleaning, handling cargo, everything. But the *Asgard* carried paid passengers, some of whom measured their wealth in megabucks; they expected luxury hotel service even light-years out in space. Of the three main departments of the *Asgard,* astrogation, engineering, and housekeeping, the Purser's was by far the largest.

A first officer could reach that high status from chief astrogator, from chief engineer, or from purser, but only if he were originally an astrogator could he go on to captain. The three officer types were essentially mathematicians, business managers, or physicists; a captain necessarily had to be able to practice the mathematical skill of astrogation. First Officer Walther, as was usually the case with a liner, had formerly been a purser.

The *Asgard* was a little world, a tiny mobile planet. It had its monarch the captain, it's useless nobility the passengers, its technical and governing class, and its hewers of wood and drawers of water. It contained flora and fauna in ecological balance; it carried its miniature sun in its power plant. Although its schedule contemplated only months in space, it was capable of staying in space indefinitely. The chef might run out of caviar, but there would be no lack of food, nor of air, nor of heat and light.

Max decided that he was lucky to be assigned to Mr. Giordano rather than to Chief Clerk Kuiper. Mr. Kuiper supervised his clerks minutely, but Mr. Gee did not often stir his fat frame out of his office-state room. He was a jovial boss—provided everything ran to suit him. Mr. Gee found it an effort to go all

the way down to the stables; once he became convinced that Max was giving the animals proper care and keeping the place clean, he gave up inspecting, merely requiring Max to report daily. This gave Giordano more time for his principal avocation, which was distilling a sort of vodka in a cubby in his stateroom, using materials grown in the hydroponds—also in his charge. He carried on a clandestine trade in his product with the crew. By keeping his mouth shut and his ears open, Max learned that this was a usual prerogative of a chief ship's steward, ignored as long as the steward had the judgment to limit his operations. The ship, of course, had a wine mess and bar, but that was for the "beasts"—crewmen could not patronize it.

"I was once in a ship," Sam told Max, "where the First clamped down—busted up the still, busted the steward to cleaning decks, and generally threw the book." He stopped to puff on his cigar, a gift from the passenger steward; they were hiding out in Maxstables, enjoying a rest and a gab. "Didn't work out."

"Why not?"

"Use your head. Forces must balance, old son. For every market there is a supplier. That's the key to the nutshell. In a month, there was a still in durn near every out-of-the-way compartment in the ship and the crew was so demoralized it wasn't fit to stuff vacuum. So the Captain had a talk with the First and things went back to normal."

Max thought it over. "Sam? Were you that ship's steward?"

"Huh? What gave you that idea?"

"Well … you've been in space before; you no longer make any bones about it. I just thought—well, you've never told me what your guild was, nor why you were on dirt, or why you had to fake it to get back to space again. I suppose it's none of my business."

Sam's habitual cynical smile gave way to an expression of sadness. "Max, a lot of things can happen to a man when he thinks he has the world by the tail. Take the case of a friend of mine, name of Roberts. A sergeant in the Imperial Marines, good record, half a dozen star jumps, a combat decoration or two. A smart lad, boning to make warrant officer. But he missed his ship once—hadn't been on Terra for some time and celebrated too much. Should have turned himself in right away, of course, taken his reduction in rank and lived it down. Trouble was, he still had money in his pocket. By the time he was broke and sober it was too late. He never quite had the guts to go back

and take his court martial and serve his sentence. Every man has his limits."

Max said presently, "You trying to say you used to be a Marine?"

"Me? Of course not, I was speaking of this guy Richards, just to illustrate what can happen to a man when he's not looking. Let's talk of more pleasant things. Kid, what do you plan to do next?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, what do you figure on doing after this jump?"

"Oh. More of the same, I guess. I like spacing. I suppose I'll try to keep my nose clean and work up to chief steward or chief clerk."

Sam shook his head. "Think it through, kid. What happens when your record in this ship is mailed to the guild? And another copy is mailed to the Department of Guilds and Labor?"

"What?"

"I'll tell you. Maybe nothing happens at first, maybe you can space for another cruise. But eventually, the red tape unwinds, they compare notes and see that while your ship lists you as an experienced steward's mate, there isn't any Max Jones in their files. Comes the day you ground at Terra and a couple of clowns with sidearms are waiting at the foot of the lift to drag you off to the calabozo."

"But Sam! I thought it was all fixed?"

"Don't blow a gasket. Look at me, I'm relaxed—and it applies to me, too. More so, for I have other reasons we needn't go into to want to let sleeping dogs bury their own dead. As for it being 'all fixed,' it is—everything I promised. You're here, aren't you? But as for the files: old son, it would have taken ten times the money to tamper with guild files, and as for locating a particular microfilm in New Washington and substituting a fake that would show the record you are supposed to have—well, I wouldn't know how to start, though no doubt it could be done, with enough time, money, and finesse."

Max felt sensations almost identical with those he had experienced when Montgomery had announced that the farm was sold. Despite his menial position, he liked it aboard ship, he had had no intention of ever doing anything else. He got along with his boss, he was making friends, he was as cozy as a bird in its nest. Now the nest was suddenly torn down. Worse, he was in a trap.

He turned white. Sam put a hand on his shoulder. "Stop

spinning, kid! You're not in a jam."

"Jail—"

"Jail my aunt's Sunday hat! You're safe as dirt until we get back. You can walk away from the *Asgard* at Earthport with your wages in your pocket and have days at least, maybe weeks or months, before anyone will notice, either at the guild mother hall or at New Washington. You can lose yourself among four billion people. You won't be any worse off than you were when you first ran into me—you were trying to get lost then, remember?—and you'll have one star trip under your belt to tell your lads about. Or they may never look for you; some clerk may chuck your trip record into the file basket and leave it there until it gets lost rather than bother. Or you might be able to persuade a clerk in Mr. Kuiper's office to lose the duplicates, not mail them in. Nelson, for example; he's got a hungry look." Sam eyed him carefully, then added, "Or you might do what I'm going to do."

Only part of what Sam had said had sunk in. Max let the record play back and gradually calmed down as he began to understand that his situation was not entirely desperate. He was inclined to agree about Nelson, as Nelson had already suggested indirectly that sometimes the efficiency marks on the ship's books were not necessarily the ones that found their way into the permanent records—under certain circumstances. He put the idea aside, not liking it and having no notion anyhow of how to go about offering a bribe.

When he came, in his mental play back, to Sam's last remark, it brought him to attention. "What are *you* going to do?"

Sam eyed the end of his cigar stub. "I'm not going back."

This required no diagram to be understood. But, under Imperial decrees, the suggested offense carried even heavier punishment than faking membership in a guild. Deserting was almost treason. "Keep talking," Max said gruffly.

"Let's run over where we touch this cruise. Garson's Planet—domed colonies, like Luna and Mars. In a domed colony, you do exactly what the powers-that-be say, or you stop breathing. You might hide out and have a new identity grafted on, but you would still be in the domes. No good, there's more freedom even back on Terra. Nu Pegasi VI, Halcyon—not bad though pretty cold at aphelion. But it is still importing more than it exports which means that the Imperials run the show and the locals will help dig out a wanted man. Now we come to Nova Terra, Beta Aquarii X—and that, old son, is what the doctor ordered and

why the preacher danced."

"You've been there?"

"Once. I should have stayed. Max, imagine a place like Earth, but sweeter than Terra ever was. Better weather, broader richer lands … forests aching to be cut, game that practically jumps into the stew pot. If you don't like settlements, you move on until you've got no neighbors, poke a seed in the ground, then jump back before it sprouts. No obnoxious insects. Practically no terrestrial diseases and no native diseases that like the flavor of our breed. Gushing rivers. Placid oceans. Man, I'm telling you!"

"But wouldn't they haul us back from there?"

"Too big. The colonists *want* more people and they won't help the Imperials. The Imperial Council has a deuce of a time just collecting taxes. They don't even try to arrest a deserter outside the bigger towns." Sam grinned. "You know why?"

"Why?"

"Because it didn't pay. An Imperial would be sent to Back-and-Beyond to pick up someone; while he was looking he would find some golden-haired daughter of a rancher eyeing him—they run to eight or nine kids, per family and there are always lots of eligible fillies, husband-high and eager. So pretty quick he is a rancher with a beard and a new name and a wife. He was a bachelor and he hasn't been home lately—or maybe he's married back on Terra and doesn't want to go home. Either way, even the Imperial Council can't fight human nature."

"I don't want to get married."

"That's your problem. But best of all, the place still has a comfortable looseness about it. No property taxes, outside the towns. Nobody would pay one; they'd just move on, if they didn't shoot the tax collector instead. No guilds—you can plow a furrow, saw a board, drive a truck, or thread a pipe, all the same day and never ask permission. A man can do anything and there's no one to stop him, no one to tell him he wasn't born into the trade, or didn't start young enough, or hasn't paid his contribution. There's more work than there are men to do it and the colonists just don't care."

Max tried to imagine such anarchy and could not, he had never experienced it. "But don't the guilds object?"

"What guilds? Oh, the mother lodges back earthside squawked when they heard, but not even the Imperial Council backed them up. They're not fools—and you don't shovel back the ocean with a fork."

"And that's where you mean to go. It sounds lovely," Max said

wistfully.

"I do. It is. There was a girl—oh, she'll be married now; they marry young—but she had sisters. Now here is what I figure on—and you, too, if you want to tag along. First time I hit dirt, I'll make contacts. The last time I rate liberty, which will be the night before the ship raises if possible, I'll go dirtside, then in a front door and out the back and over the horizon so fast I won't even be a speck. By the time I'm marked 'late returning,' I'll be hundreds of miles away, lying beside a chuckling stream in a virgin wilderness, letting my beard grow and memorizing my new name. Say the word and you'll be on the bank, fishing."

Max stirred uneasily. The picture aroused in him a hillbilly homesickness he had hardly been aware of. But he could not shuffle off his proud *persona* as a spaceman so quickly. I'll think about it."

"Do that. It's a good many weeks yet, anyhow." Sam got to his feet. "I'd better hurry back before Ole Massa Dumont wonders what's keeping me. Be seeing you, kid—and remember: it's an ill wind that has no turning."

7
ELDRETH

Max's duties did not take him above "C" deck except to service the cats' sand boxes and he usually did that before the passengers were up. He wanted to visit the control room but he had no opportunity, it being still higher than passengers' quarters. Often, an owner of one of the seven dogs and three cats in Max's custody would come down to visit his pet. This sometimes resulted in a tip. At first, his cross-grained hillbilly pride caused him to refuse, but when Sam heard about it, he swore at him dispassionately. "Don't be a fool! They can afford it. What's the sense?"

"But I would exercise their mutts anyhow. It's my job." He might have remained unconvinced had it not been that Mr. Gee asked him about it at the end of his first week, seemed to have a shrewd idea of the usual take, and expected a percentage—"for the welfare fund."

Max asked Sam about the fund, was laughed at. "That's a very interesting question. Are there any more questions?"

"I suppose not."

"Max, I like you. But you haven't learned yet that when in Rome, you shoot Roman candles. Every tribe has its customs and what is moral one place is immoral somewhere else. There are races where a son's first duty is to loll off his old man and serve him up as a feast as soon as he is old enough to swing it—civilized races, too. Races the Council recognizes diplomatically. What's your moral judgment on that?"

Max had read of such cultures—the gentle and unwarlike Bnathors, or the wealthy elephantine amphibians of Paldron who were anything but gentle, probably others. He did not feel disposed to pass judgment on nonhumans. Sam went on, "I've known stewards who would make Jelly Belly look like a philanthropist. Look at it from his point of view. He regards these things as prerogatives of his position, as rightful a part of his income as his wages. Custom says so. It's taken him years to get to where he is; he expects his reward."

Sam, Max reflected, could always out-talk him.

But he could not concede that Sam's thesis was valid; there were things that were right and others that were wrong and it

was not just a matter of where you were. He felt this with an inner conviction too deep to be influenced by Sam's cheerful cynicism. It worried Max that he was where he was as the result of chicanery, he sometimes lay awake and fretted about it.

But it worried him still more that his deception might come to light. What to do about Sam's proposal was a problem always on his mind.

The only extra-terrestrial among Max's charges was a spider puppy from the terrestrian planet Hespera. On beginning his duties in the *Asgard* Max found the creature in one of the cages intended for cats; Max looked into it and a sad, little, rather simian face looked back at him. "Hello, Man."

Max knew that some spider puppies had been taught human speech, after a fashion, but it startled him; he jumped back. He then recovered and looked more closely. "Hello yourself," he answered. "My, but you are a fancy little fellow." The creature's fur was a deep, rich green on its back, giving way to orange on the sides and blending to warm cream color on its little round belly.

"Want out," stated the spider puppy.

"I can't let you out. I've got work to do." He read the card affixed to the cage: "Mr. Chips" it stated, *Pseudocanis hexapoda hesperae,* Owner: Miss E. Coburn, A-092; there followed a detailed instruction as to diet and care. Mr. Chips ate grubs, a supply of which was to be found in freezer compartment H-118, fresh fruits and vegetables, cooked or uncooked, and should receive iodine if neither seaweed nor artichokes was available. Max thumbed through his mind, went over what he had read about the creatures, decided the instructions were reasonable.

"Please out!" Mr. Chips insisted.

It was an appeal hard to resist. No maiden fayre crying from a dungeon tower had ever put it more movingly. The compartment in which the cats were located was small and the door could be fastened; possibly Mr. Chips could be allowed a little run—but later; just now he had to take care of other animals.

When Max left, Mr. Chips was holding onto the bars and sobbing gently. Max looked back and saw that it was crying real tears; a drop trembled on the tip of its ridiculous little nose; it was hard to walk out on it. He had finished with the stables before tackling the kennel; once the dogs and cats were fed and their cages policed, he was free to give attention to his new

friend. He had fed it first off, which had stopped the crying. When he returned, however, the demand to be let out resumed.

"If I let you out, will you get back in later?"

The spider puppy considered this. A conditional proposition seemed beyond its semantic attainments, for it repeated, "Want out." Max took a chance.

Mr. Chips landed on his shoulder and started going through his pockets. "Candy," it demanded. "Candy?"

Max stroked it. "Sorry, chum. I didn't know."

"Candy?"

"No candy." Mr. Chips investigated personally, then settled in the crook of Max's arm, prepared to spend a week or more. It wasn't, Max decided, much like a puppy and certainly not like a spider, except that six legs seemed excessive. The two front ones had little hands; the middle legs served double duty. It was more like a monkey, but felt like a cat. It had a slightly spicy fragrance and seemed quite clean.

Max tried talking to it, but found its intellectual attainments quite limited. Certainly, it used human words meaningfully, but its vocabulary was not richer than that which might be expected of a not-too-bright toddler.

When Max tried to return it to its cage, there ensued twenty minutes of brisk exercise, broken by stalemates. Mr. Chips swarmed over the cages, causing hysterics among the cats. When at last the spider puppy allowed itself to be caught, it still resisted imprisonment, clinging to Max and sobbing. He ended by walking it like a baby until it fell asleep.

This was a mistake. A precedent had been set and thereafter Max was not permitted to leave the kennel without walking the baby.

He wondered about the "Miss Coburn" described on the tag as Mr. Chips' owner. All of the owners of cats and dogs had shown up to visit their pets, but Mr. Chips remained unvisited. He visualized her as a sour and hatchet-faced spinster who had received the pet as a going-away present and did not appreciate it. As his friendship with the spider puppy grew, his mental picture of Miss E. Coburn became even less attractive.

The *Asgard* was over a week out and only days from its first spatial transition before Max had a chance to compare conception with fact. He was cleaning the stables, with Mr. Chips riding his shoulder and offering advice, when Max heard a shrill voice from the kennel compartment "Mr. *Chips!* Chipsie! Where are you?"

The spider puppy sat up suddenly and turned its head. Almost immediately a young female appeared in the door; Mr. Chips squealed, “Ellie!” and jumped to her arms. While they were nuzzling each other Max looked her over. Sixteen, he judged, or seventeen. Or maybe even eighteen—shucks, how was a fellow to tell when womenfolk did such funny things to their faces? Anyhow, she was no beauty and the expression on her face didn’t help it any.

She looked up at him and scowled. “What were you doing with Chipsie? Answer me that!”

It got his back fur up. “Nothing,” he said stiffly. “If you will excuse me, ma’am, I’ll get on with my work.”

He turned his back and bent over his broom.

She grabbed his arm and swung him around. “Answer me! Or … or—I’ll tell the Captain, that’s what I’ll do!”

Max counted ten, then just to be sure, recalled the first dozen 7-place natural logarithms. “That’s your privilege, ma’am,” he said with studied calmness, “but first, what’s your name and what is your business here? I’m in charge of these compartments and responsible for these animals—as the Captain’s representative.” This he knew to be good space law, although the concatenation was long.

She looked startled. “Why, I’m Eldreth Coburn,” she blurted as if anyone should know.

“And your business?”

“I came to see Mr. Chips—of course!”

“Very well, ma’am. You may visit your pet for a reasonable period,” he added, quoting verbatim from his station instruction sheet. “Then he goes back in his cage. Don’t disturb the other animals and don’t feed them. That’s orders.”

She started to speak, decided not to and bit her lip. The spider puppy had been looking from face to face and listening to a conversation far beyond its powers, although it may have sensed the emotions involved. Now it reached out and plucked Max’s sleeve. “Max,” Mr. Chips announced brightly. “Max!”

Miss Coburn again looked startled. “Is that your name?”

“Yes, ma’am. Max Jones. I guess he was trying to introduce me. Is that it, old fellow?”

“Max,” Mr. Chips repeated firmly. “Ellie.”

Eldreth Coburn looked down, then looked up at Max with a sheepish smile. “You two seem to be friends. I guess I spoke out of turn. Me and my mouth.”

“No offense meant I’m sure, ma’am.”

Max had continued to speak stiffly; she answered quickly, "Oh, but I was rude! I'm sorry—I'm always sorry afterwards. But I got panicky when I saw the cage open and empty and I thought I had lost Chipsie."

Max grinned grudgingly. "Sure. Don't blame you a bit. You were scared."

"That's it—I was scared." She glanced at him. "Chipsie calls you Max. May I call you Max?"

"Why not? Everybody does—and it's my name."

"And you call me Eldreth, Max. Or Ellie."

She stayed on, playing with the spider puppy, until Max had finished with the cattle. She then said reluctantly, "I guess I had better go, or they'll be missing me."

"Are you coming back?"

"Oh, of course!"

"Ummm … Miss Eldreth …"

"Ellie."

"—May I ask a question?" He hurried on, "Maybe it's none of my business, but what took you so long? That little fellow has been awful lonesome. He thought you had deserted him."

"Not 'he'—'she'."

"Huh?"

"Mr. Chips is a girl," she said apologetically. "It was a mistake anyone could make. Then it was too late, because it would confuse her to change her name."

The spider puppy looked up brightly and repeated, "'Mr. Chips is a girl.' Candy, Ellie?"

"Next time, honey bun."

Max doubted if the name was important, with the nearest other spider puppy light-years away. "You didn't answer my question?"

"Oh. I was so mad about that, I wanted to bite. They wouldn't let me."

"Who's 'they'? Your folks?"

"Oh, no! The Captain and Mrs. Dumont." Max decided that it was almost as hard to extract information from her as it was from Mr. Chips. "You see, I came aboard in a stretcher—some silly fever, food poisoning probably. It couldn't be much because I'm tough. But they kept me in bed and when the Surgeon did let me get up, Mrs. Dumont said I mustn't go below 'C' deck. She had some insipid notion that it wasn't proper."

Max understood the stewardess's objection; he had already discovered that some of his shipmates were a rough lot—though

he doubted that any of them would risk annoying a girl passenger. Why, Captain Blaine would probably space a man for that.

"So I had to sneak out. They're probably searching for me right now. I'd better scoot."

This did not fit in with Mr. Chips' plans. The spider puppy clung to her and sobbed, stopping occasionally to wipe tears away with little fists. "Oh, dear!"

Max looked perturbed. "I guess I've spoiled him—her. Mr. Chips, I mean." He explained how the ceremony of walking the baby had arisen.

Eldreth protested, "But I must go. What'll I do?"

"Here, let's see if he—she—will come to me." Mr. Chips would and did. Eldreth gave her a pat and ran out, whereupon Mr. Chips took even longer than usual to doze off. Max wondered if spider puppies could be hypnotized; the ritual was getting monotonous.

Eldreth showed up next day under the stern eye of Mrs. Dumont. Max was respectful to the stewardess and careful to call Eldreth "Miss Coburn." She returned alone the next day. He looked past her and raised his eyebrows. "Where's your chaperone?"

Eldreth giggled. "La Dumont consulted her husband and he called in your boss—the fat one. They agreed that you were a perfect little gentleman, utterly harmless. How do you like that?"

Max considered it. "Well, I'm an ax murderer by profession, but I'm on vacation."

"That's nice. What have you got there?"

It was a three-dimensional chess set. Max had played the game with his uncle, it being one that all astrogators played. Finding that some of the chartsmen and computermen played it, he had invested his tips in a set from the ship's slop chest. It was a cheap set, having no attention lights and no arrangements for remote-control moving, being merely stacked transparent trays and pieces molded instead of carved, but it sufficed.

"It's solid chess. Ever seen it?"

"Yes. But I didn't know you played it"

"Why not? Ever play flat chess?'

"Some."

"The principles are the same, but there are more pieces and one more direction to move. Here, I'll show you."

She sat tailor-fashion opposite him and he ran over the

moves. “These are robot freighters … pawns. They can be commissioned anything else if they reach the far rim. These four are starships; they are the only ones with funny moves, they correspond with knights. They have to make interspace transitions, always off the level they’re on to some other level and the transition has to be related a certain way, like this—or this. And this is the Imperial flagship; it’s the one that has to be checkmated. Then there is …” They ran through a practice game, with the help of Mr. Chips, who liked to move the pieces and did not care whose move it was.

Presently he said, “You catch on pretty fast.”

“Thanks.”

“Of course, the *real* players play four-dimensional chess.”

“Do you?”

“Well, no. But I hope to learn some day. It’s just a matter of holding in your mind one more spatial relationship. My uncle used to play it. He was going to teach me, but he died.” He found himself explaining about his uncle. He trailed off without mentioning his own disappointment

Eldreth picked up one of the starship pieces from a tray. “Say, Max, we’re pretty near our first transition, aren’t we?”

“What time is it?”

“Uh, sixteen twenty-one—say, I’d better get upstairs.”

“Then it’s, uh, about thirty-seven hours and seven minutes, according to the computer crew.”

“Mmm … you seem to know about such things. Could you tell me just what it is we do? I heard the Astrogator talking about it at the table but I couldn’t make head nor tail. We sort of duck into a space warp; isn’t that right?”

“Oh no, not a space warp. That’s a silly term—space doesn’t ‘warp’ except in places where *pi* isn’t exactly three point one four one five nine two six five three five eight nine seven nine three two three eight four six two six four three three eight three two seven, and so forth—like inside a nucleus. But we’re heading out to a place where space is *really* flat, not just mildly curved the way it is near a star. Anomalies are always flat, otherwise they couldn’t fit together—be congruent.”

She looked puzzled. “Come again?”

“Look, Eldreth, how far did you go in mathematics?”

“Me? I flunked improper fractions. Miss Mimsey was very vexed with me.”

“Miss Mimsey?”

“Miss Mimsey’s School for Young Ladies, so you see I can

listen with an open mind." She made a face. "But you told me that all you went to was a country high school and didn't get to finish at that. Huh?"

"Yes, but I learned from my uncle. He was a great mathematician. Well, he didn't have any theorems named after him—but a great one just the same, *I* think." He paused. "I don't know exactly how to tell you; it takes equations. Say! Could you lend me that scarf you're wearing for a minute?"

"Huh? Why, sure." She removed it from her neck.

It was a photoprint showing a stylized picture of the solar system, a souvenir of Solar Union Day. In the middle of the square of cloth was the conventional sunburst surrounded by circles representing orbits of solar planets, with a few comets thrown in. The scale was badly distorted and it was useless as a structural picture of the home system, but it sufficed. Max took it and said, "Here's Mars."

Eldreth said, "You read it. That's cheating."

"Hush a moment. Here's Jupiter. To go from Mars to Jupiter you have to go from here to here, don't you?"

"Obviously."

"But suppose I fold it so that Mars is on top of Jupiter? What's to prevent just stepping across?"

"Nothing, I guess. Except that what works for that scarf wouldn't work very well in practice. Would it?"

"No, not that near to a star. But it works fine after you back away from a star quite a distance. You see, that's just what an anomaly is, a place where space is folded back on itself, turning a long distance into no distance at all."

"Then space *is* warped."

"No, no, no! Look, I just folded your scarf. I didn't stretch it out of shape! I didn't even wrinkle it. Space is the same way; it's crumpled like a piece of waste paper—but it's not warped, just crumpled. Through some extra dimensions, of course."

"I don't see any 'of course' about it."

"The math of it is simple, but it's hard to talk about because you can't see it. Space—*our* space—may be crumpled up small enough to stuff into a coffee cup, all hundreds of thousands of light-years of it. A four-dimensional coffee cup, of course."

She sighed. "I don't see how a four-dimensional coffee cup could even hold coffee, much less a whole galaxy."

"No trouble at all. You could stuff this sheer scarf into a thimble. Same principle. But let me finish. They used to think that nothing could go faster than light. Well, that was both right

and wrong. It …"

"How can it be both?"

"That's one of the Horst anomalies. You can't go faster than light, not in our space. If you do, you burst out of it. But if you do it where space is folded back and congruent, you pop right back into our own space again—but a long way off. How far off depends on how it's folded. And that depends on the mass in the space, in a complicated fashion that can't be described in words but can be calculated."

"But suppose you do it just anywhere?"

"That's what happened to the first ones who tried it. They didn't come back. And that's why surveys are dangerous; survey ships go poking through anomalies that have been calculated but never tried. That's also why astrogators get paid so much. They have to head the ship for a place you can't see and they have to put the ship there just under the speed of light and they have to give it the gun at just the right world point. Drop a decimal point or use a short-cut that covers up an indeterminancy and itjust too bad. Now we've been gunning at twenty-four gee ever since we left the atmosphere. We don't feel it of course because we are carried inside a discontinuity field at an artificial one gravity—that's another of the anomalies. But we're getting up close to the speed of light, up against the Einstein Wall; pretty soon, we'll be squeezed through like a watermelon seed between your finger and thumb and we'll come out near Theta Centauri fifty-eight light-years away. Simple, if you look at it right."

She shivered. *"If* we come out, you mean."

"Well … I suppose so. But it's not as dangerous as helicopters. And look at it this way: if it weren't for the anomalies, there never would have been any way for us to reach the stars; the distances are too great. But looking back, it is obvious that all that emptiness couldn't be real—there *had* to be the anomalies. That's what my uncle used to say."

"I suppose he must have been right, even if I don't understand it." She scrambled to her feet. "But I do know that I had better hoof it back upstairs, or Mrs. Dumont may change her mind." She hugged Mr. Chips and shoved the little creature into Max's arms. "Walk the baby—that's a pal."

8
THREE WAYS TO GET AHEAD

Max intended to stay awake during the first transition, but he slept through it. It took place shortly after five in the morning, ship's time. When he was awakened by idlers' reveille at six, it was all over. He jerked on his clothes, fuming at not having awakened earlier, and hurried to the upper decks. The passageways above Charlie deck were silent and empty; even the early risers among the passengers would not be up for another hour. He went at once to the Bifrost Lounge and crossed it to the view port, placed there for the pleasure of passengers.

The stars looked normal but the familiar, age-old constellations were gone. Only the Milky Way, our own galaxy, seemed as usual—to that enormous spiral of stars, some hundred thousand fight-years across, a tiny displacement of less than sixty light-years was inconsequential.

One extremely bright yellow-white star was visible; Max decided that it must be Theta Centauri, sun of Garson's Planet, their first stop. He left shortly, not wanting to chance being found loafing in passengers' country. The sand boxes which constituted his excuse were then replaced with greater speed than usual and he was back in crew's quarters in time for breakfast.

The passage to Garson's Planet took most of a month even at the high boost possible to a Horst-Conrad ship. Eldreth continued to make daily trips to see Mr. Chips—and to talk with and play three-dee chess with Max. He learned that while she had not been born on Hespera, but in Auckland on Terra, nevertheless Hespera was her home. "Daddy sent me back to have them turn me into a lady, but it didn't take."

"What do you mean?"

She grinned. "I'm a problem. That's why I've been sent for. You're in check, Max. Chipsie! Put that back. I think the little demon is playing on your side."

He gradually pieced together what she meant. Miss Mimsey's school had been the third from which she had been expelled. She did not like Earth, she was determined to go home, and she had created a reign of terror at each institution to which she

had been entrusted. Her widower father had been determined that she must have a "proper" education, but she had been in a better strategic position to impose her will—her father's Earthside attorneys had washed their hands of her and shipped her home.

Sam made the mistake of joshing Max about Eldreth. "Have you gotten her to set the day yet, old son?"

"Who set what day?"

"Now, now! Everybody in the ship knows about it, except possibly the Captain. Why play dumb with your old pal?"

"I don't know what you are talking about!"

"I wasn't criticizing, I was admiring. I'd never have the nerve to plot so high a trajectory myself. But as grandpop always said, there are just three ways to get ahead: sweat and genius, getting born into the right family, or marrying into it. Of the three, marrying the boss's daughter is the best, because—Hey! Take it easy!" Sam skipped back out of range.

"Take that back!"

"I do, I do. I was wrong. But my remarks were inspired by sheer admiration. Mistaken, I admit. So I apologize and withdraw the admiration."

"But …" Max grinned in spite of himself. It was impossible to stay angry at Sam. Sure, the man was a scamp, probably a deserter, certainly a belittler who always looked at things in the meanest of terms, but—well, there it was. Sam was his friend.

"I knew you were joking. How could I be figuring on getting married when you and I are going to …"

"Keep your voice down." Sam went on quietly, "You've made up your mind?"

"Yes. It's the only way out, I guess. I don't want to go back to Earth."

"Good boy! You'll never regret it." Sam looked thoughtful. "We'll need money."

"Well, I'll have some on the books."

"Don't be silly. You try to draw more than spending money and they'll never let you set foot on dirt. But don't worry—save your tips, all that Fats will let you keep, and I'll get us a stake. It's my turn."

"How?"

"Lots of ways. You can forget it."

"Well … all right. Say, Sam, just what did you mean when you—I mean, well, suppose I did want to marry Ellie—I don't of course; she's just a kid and anyhow I'm not the type to marry—

but just supposing? Why should anybody care?"

Sam looked surprised. 'You don't know?"

"Why would I be asking?"

"You don't know who she is?"

"Huh? Her name's Eldreth Coburn and she's on her way home to Hespera, she's a colonial. What of it?"

"You poor boy! She didn't mention that she is the only daughter of His Supreme Excellency, General Sir John FitzGerald Coburn, O.B.E., K.B., O.S.U., and probably X.Y.Z., Imperial Ambassador to Hespera and Resident Commissioner Plenipotentiary?"

"Huh? Oh my gosh!"

"Catch on, kid? With the merest trifle of finesse, you can be a remittance man, at least. Name your own planet, just as long as it isn't Hespera."

"Oh, go boil your head! She's a nice kid anyhow."

Sam snickered. "She sure is. As grandpop used to say, 'It's an ill wind that gathers no moss.'"

The knowledge disturbed Max. He had realized that Eldreth must be well to do—she was a passenger, wasn't she? But he had no awe of wealth. Achievement as exemplified by his uncle held much more respect in his eyes. But the notion that Eldreth came from such an impossibly high stratum—and that he, Maximilian Jones, was considered a fortune-hunter and social climber on that account—was quite upsetting.

He decided to put an end to it. He started by letting his work pile up so that he could say truthfully that he did not have time to play three-dee chess. So Ellie pitched in and helped him. While he was playing the unavoidable game that followed, he attempted a direct approach. "See here, Ellie, I don't think you ought to stay down here and play three-dee chess with me. The other passengers come down to see their pets and they notice. They'll gossip."

"Pooh!"

"I mean it. Oh, you and I know it's all right, but it doesn't look right."

She stuck out her lower lip. "Am I going to have trouble with you? You talk just like Miss Mimsey."

"You can come down to see Chipsie, but you'd better come down with one of the other pet owners."

She started to make a sharp answer, then shrugged, "Okay, this isn't the most comfortable place anyhow. From now on, we play in Bifrost Lounge, afternoons when your work is done and

evenings."

Max protested that Mr. Giordano would not let him; she answered quickly, "Don't worry about your boss. I can twist him around my little finger." She illustrated by gesture.

The picture of the gross Mr. Gee in such a position slowed up Max's answer, but he finally managed to get out, "Ellie, crew members can't use the passenger lounge. It's …"

"They can so. More than once, I've seen Mr. Dumont having a cup of coffee there with Captain Blaine."

"You don't understand. Mr. Dumont is almost an officer, and if the Captain wants him as his guest, well, that's the Captain's privilege."

"You'd be my guest."

"No, I wouldn't be." He tried to explain to her the strict regulation that crew members were not to associate with passengers. "The Captain would be angry if he could see us right now—not at you, at me. If he caught me in the passengers' lounge he'd kick me all the way down to 'H' deck."

"I don't believe it."

"But …" He shrugged. "All right. I'll come up this evening. He won't kick me, actually; that would be beneath him. He'll just send Mr. Dumont over to tell me to leave, then he'll send for me in the morning. I don't mind being fined a month's pay if that is what it takes to show you the way things are."

He could see that he had finally reached her. "Why, I think that's perfectly rotten! Everybody is equal. Everybody! That's the law."

"They are? Only from on top."

She got up suddenly and left. Max again had to soothe Mr. Chips, but there was no one to soothe him. He decided that the day that he and Sam disappeared over a horizon and lost themselves could not come too soon.

Eldreth returned next day but in company with a Mrs. Mendoza, the devoted owner of a chow who looked much like her. Eldreth treated Max with the impersonal politeness of a lady "being nice" to servants, except for a brief moment when Mrs. Mendoza was out of earshot.

"Max?"

"Yes, Miss?"

"I'll 'Yes, Miss' you! Look, Max, what was your uncle's name? Was it *Chester* Jones?"

"Why, yes, it was. But why …"

"Never mind." Mrs. Mendoza rejoined them. Max was forced

to drop it.

The following morning, the dry-stores keeper sought him out. "Hey, Max! The Belly wants you. Better hurry—I think you're in some sort of a jam."

Max worried as he hurried. He couldn't think of anything he had done lately; he tried to suppress the horrid fear that Ellie was involved.

It was clear that Mr. Giordano was not pleased but all that he said was, "Report to the Purser's Office. Jump." Max jumped.

The Purser was not there; Mr. Kuiper received him and looked him over with a cold eye. "Put on a clean uniform and make it quick. Then report to the Captain's cabin."

Max stood still and gulped. Mr. Kuiper barked, "Well? Move!"

"Sir," Max blurted, "I don't know where the Captain's cabin is."

"What? I'll be switched! Able deck, radius nine oh and outboard." Max moved.

The Captain was in his cabin. With him was Mr. Samuels the Purser, Mr. Walther the First Officer, and Dr. Hendrix the Astrogator. Max concluded that whatever it was he was about to be tried for, it could be nothing trivial. But he remembered to say, "Steward's Mate Third Class Jones reporting, sir."

Captain Blaine looked up. "Oh, yes. Find a chair." Max found one, sat down on the edge of it. The Captain said to the First Officer, "Under the circumstances, Dutch, I suppose it's the best thing to do—though it seems a little drastic. You agree, Hal?" The Purser agreed. Max wondered just how drastic it was and whether he would live through it.

"We'll log it as an exception, then, Doc, and I'll write up an explanation for the board. After all, regulations were made to be broken. That's the end of it." Max decided that they were simply going to space him and explain it later. The Captain turned back to his desk in a manner that signified that the meeting was over. The First Officer cleared his throat. "Captain …" He indicated Max with his eyes.

Captain Blaine looked up again. "Oh, yes! Young man, your name is Jones?"

"Yessir."

"I've been looking over your record. I see that you once tried out for chartsman for a short time in the *Thule?*"

"Uh, yes, Captain."

"Didn't you like it?"

"Well, sir." Max asked himself what Sam would say when

confronted by such a ghost. “It was like this … to tell you the truth I didn’t do much except empty ash trays in the Worry—in the control room.” He held his breath.

The Captain smiled briefly. “It can sometimes work out that way. Would you be interested in trying it again?”

“What? Yes, *sir!*”

“Dutch?”

“Captain, ordinarily I see no point in a man striking twice for the same job. But there is this personal matter.”

“Yes, indeed. You can spare him, Hal?”

“Oh, certainly, Captain. He’s hardly a key man where he is.” The Purser smiled. “Bottom deck valet.”

The Captain smiled and turned to the Astrogator. “I see no objection, Doc. It’s a guild matter, of course.”

“Kelly is willing to try him. He’s short a man, you know.”

“Very well, then …”

“Just a moment, Captain.” The Astrogator turned to Max. “Jones … you had a relative in my guild?”

“My uncle, sir. Chester Jones.”

“I served under him. I hope you have some of his skill with figures.”

“Uh, I hope so, sir.”

“We shall see. Report to Chief Computerman Kelly.” Max managed to find the control room without asking directions, although he could hardly see where he was going.

9
CHARTSMAN JONES

The change in Max's status changed the whole perspective of his life. His social relations with the other crew members changed not entirely for the better. The control room gang considered themselves the gentry of the crew, a status disputed by the power technicians and resented by the stewards. Max found that the guild he was leaving no longer treated him quite as warmly while the guild for which he was trying out did not as yet accept him.

Mr. Gee simply ignored him—would walk right over him if Max failed to jump aside. He seemed to regard Max's trial promotion as a personal affront.

It was necessary for him to hit the slop chest for dress uniforms. Now that his duty station was in the control room, now that he must pass through passengers' country to go to and from work, it was no longer permissible to slouch around in dungarees. Mr. Kuiper let him sign for them; his cash would not cover it. He had to sign as well for the cost of permission to work out of his guild, with the prospect of going further in debt to both guilds should he be finally accepted. He signed cheerfully.

The control department of the *Asgard* consisted of two officers and five men—Dr. Hendrix the Astrogator, his assistant astrogator Mr. Simes, Chief Computerman Kelly, Chartsman First Class Kovak, Chtsmn 2/c Smythe, and computermen Noguchi and Lundy, both second class. There was also "Sack" Bennett, communicator first class, but he was not really a part of the control gang, even though his station was in the Worry Hole; a starship was rarely within radio range of anything except at the very first and last parts of a trip. Bennett doubled as Captain Blaine's secretary and factotum and owed his nickname to the often-stated belief of the others that he spent most of his life in his bunk.

Since the *Asgard* was always under boost, a continuous watch was kept; not for them were the old, easy days of rocket ships, with ten minutes of piloting followed by weeks of free fall before more piloting was required. Since the *Asgard* carried no apprentice astrogator, there were only two officers to stand

watches (Captain Blaine was necessarily an astrogator himself, but skippers do not stand watches); this lack was made up by Chief Computerman Kelly, who stood a regular watch as control officer-of-the-watch. The other ratings stood a watch in four; the distinction between a computerman and a chartsman was nominal in a control room dominated by "Decimal Point" Kelly —what a man didn't know he soon learned, or found another ship.

Easy watches for everyone but Max—he was placed on watch-and-watch for instruction, four hours on followed by four hours off in which he must eat, keep himself clean, relax, and—if he found time—sleep.

But he thrived on it, arriving early and sometimes having to be ordered out of the Worry Hole. Not until much later did he find out that this stiff regime was Kelly's way of trying to break him, discover his weakness and get rid of him promptly if he failed to measure up.

Not all watches were pleasant. Max's very first watch was under Mr. Simes. He crawled up the hatch into the control room and looked around him in wonderment. On four sides were the wonderfully delicate parallax cameras. Between two of them Lundy sat at the saddle of the main computer; he looked up and nodded but did not speak. Mr. Simes sat at the control console, facing the hatch; he must have seen Max but gave no sign of it.

There were other instruments crowded around the walls, some of which Max recognized from reading and from seeing pictures, some of which were strange—tell-tales and gauges from each of the ship's compartments, a screen to reproduce the view aft or "below," microphone and controls for the ship's announcing system, the "tank" or vernier stereograph in which plates from the parallax cameras could be compared with charts, spectrostellograph, dopplerscope, multipoint skin temperature recorder, radar repeater for landing, too many things to take in at once.

Overhead through the astrogation dome was the starry universe. He stared at it, mouth agape. Living as he had been, inside a steel cave, he had hardly seen the stars; the firmament had been more with him back home on the farm.

"Hey! You!"

Max shook his head and found Mr. Simes looking at him. "Come here." Max did so, the assistant astrogator went on, "Don't you know enough to report to the watch officer when you come on duty?"

"Uh—sorry, sir."

"Besides that, you're late." Max slid his eyes to the chronometer in the console; it still lacked five minutes of the hour. Simes continued, "A sorry state of affairs when crewmen relieve the watch later than the watch officer. What's your name?"

"Jones, sir."

Mr. Simes sniffed. He was a red-faced young man with thin, carroty hair and a sniff was his usual conversational embellishment, at least with juniors. "Make a fresh pot of coffee."

"Aye aye, sir." Max started to ask where and how, but Mr. Simes had gone back to his reading. Max looked helplessly at Lundy, who indicated a direction with his eyes. Behind the chart safe Max found a coffee maker and under it cups, saucers, sugar, and tins of cream.

He burned himself before getting the hang of gear's idiosyncrasies. Mr. Simes accepted the brew without looking at him. Max wondered what to do next, decided to offer a cup to Lundy. The computerman thanked him quietly and Max decided to risk having one himself, since it seemed to be accepted. He took it over beside the computer to drink it.

He was still doing so when the watch officer spoke up. "What is this? A tea party? Jones!"

"Yes, sir?"

"Get the place policed up. Looks as if a herd of chucks had been wallowing in it."

The room seemed clean, but Max found a few scraps of paper to pick up and stuff down the chute, after which he wiped already-gleaming brightwork. He had started to go over things a second time when Lundy motioned him over. Max then helped Lundy change plates in the parallax cameras and watched him while he adjusted the electronic timer. Mr. Simes pushed the ready button himself, which seemed to be his sole work during the watch.

Lundy removed the plates and set them up in the tank for chart comparison, took the readings and logged them. Max gave him nominal help and gathered some notion of how it was done, after which he again wiped brightwork.

It was a long watch. He went to his bunk drained of the elation he had felt.

But watches with Dr. Hendrix and with Chief Kelly were quite different. The Worry Hole was a jolly place under Kelly; he

ruled as a benevolent tyrant, shouting, cursing, slandering the coffee, slurring his juniors and being sassed back. Max never touched a polish rag when Kelly was at control; he was kept too busy not merely helping but systematically studying everything in the room. “We haven’t a condemned thing to do,” Kelly shouted at him, “until we hit Garson’s Folly. Nothing to do but to ride this groove down until we hit dirt. So you, my laddy buck, are going to do plenty. When we get there you are going to know this condemned hole better than your mother knew your father—or you can spend your time there learning what you’ve missed while your mates are dirtside getting blind. Get out the instruction manual for the main computer, take off the back plate and get lost in them wires. I don’t want to see anything but your ugly behind the rest of this watch.”

Within ten minutes, Kelly was down on his knees with him, helping him trace the intricate circuits.

Max learned, greatly assisted by his photographic memory and still more by the sound grounding in theory he had gotten from his uncle. Kelly was pleased. “I reckon you exaggerated a mite when you said you hadn’t learned anything in the *Thule.”*

“Well, not much.”

“Johansen have the Worry Hole when you were striking?”

“Uh, yes.” Max hoped frantically that Kelly would not ask other names.

“I thought so. That squarehead wouldn’t tell his own mother how old he was.”

There came a watch when Kelly trusted him to do a dry run for a transition approach on the computer, with Noguchi handling the tables and Kelly substituting for the astrogator by following records of the actual transition the ship had last made. The programming was done orally, as is the case when the astrogator is working under extreme pressure from latest data, just before giving the crucial signal to boost past the speed of light.

Kelly took it much more slowly than would happen in practice, while Noguchi consulted tables and called out figures to Max. He was nervous at first, his fingers trembling so that it was hard to punch the right keys—then he settled down and enjoyed it, feeling as if he and the machine had been born for each other.

Kelly was saying, “—times the binary natural logarithm of zero point eight seven oh nine two.” Max heard Noguchi’s voice call back the datum while he thumbed for the page—but in his

mind Max saw the page in front of his eyes long before Noguchi located it; without conscious thought he depressed the right keys.

"Correction!" sang out Kelly. "Look, meathead, you don't put in them figures; you wait for translation by Noggy here. How many times I have to tell you?"

"But I did—" Max started, then stopped. Thus far, he had managed to keep anyone aboard the *Asgard* from learning of his embarrassingly odd memory.

"You did what?" Kelly started to clear the last datum from the board, then hesitated. "Come to think of it, you can't possibly feed decimal figures into that spaghetti mill. Just what *did* you do?"

Max knew he was right and hated to appear not to know how to set up a problem. "Why, I put in the figures Noguchi was about to give me."

"How's that again?" Kelly stared at him. "You a mind reader?"

"No. But I put in the right figures."

"Hmm …" Kelly bent over the keyboard. "Call 'em off, Noggy." The computerman reeled off a string of ones and zeroes, the binary equivalent of the decimal expression Kelly had given him; Kelly checked the depressed keys, his lips moving in concentration. He straightened up. "I once saw a man roll thirteen sevens with honest dice. Was it fool luck, Max?"

"No."

"Well! Noggy, gimme that book." Kelly went through the rest of the problem, giving Max raw data and the operations to be performed, but not translating the figures into the binary notation the computer required. He kept thumbing the book and glancing over Max's shoulder. Max fought off stage fright and punched the keys, while sweat poured into his eyes.

At last Kelly said, "Okay. Twist its tail." Max flipped the switch which allowed the computer to swallow the program and worry it for an instant; the answer popped out in lights, off or on—the machine's equivalent of binary figures.

Kelly translated the lights back into decimal notation, using the manual. He then glanced at the recorded problem. He closed the record book and handed it to Noguchi. "I think I'll have a cup of coffee," he said quietly and walked away.

Noguchi reopened it, looked at the lights shining on the board and consulted the manual, after which he looked at Max very oddly. Max saw Kelly staring at him over a cup with the same

expression. Max reached up and cleared the board entirely; the lights went out. He got down out of the computerman's saddle. No body said anything.

Max's next watch was with Dr. Hendrix. He enjoyed watches with the Astrogator almost as much as those with Kelly; Dr. Hendrix was a friendly and soft-spoken gentleman and gave as much attention to training Max as Kelly did. But this time, Kelly lingered on after being relieved—in itself nothing, as the Chief Computerman frequently consulted with, or simply visited with, the Astrogator at such times. But today, after relieving the watch, Dr. Hendrix said pleasantly, "Kelly tells me that you are learning to use the computer, Jones?"

"Uh, yes, sir."

"Very well, let's have a drill." Dr. Hendrix dug out an old astrogation log and selected a transition-approach problem similar to the one Max had set up earlier. Kelly took the manual, ready to act as his "numbers boy—" but did not call the translations. Max waited for the first one; when it did not come, he read the figures from the page shining in his mind and punched them in.

It continued that way. Kelly said nothing, but wet his lips and checked what Max did each time the doctor offered a bit of the problem. Kovak watched from nearby, his eyes moving from actor to actor.

At last, Dr. Hendrix closed the book. "I see," he agreed, as if it were an everyday occurrence. "Jones, that is an extremely interesting talent. I've read of such cases, but you are the first I have met. You've heard of Blind Tom?"

"No, sir."

"Perhaps the ship's library has an account of him." The Astrogator was silent for a moment. "I don't mean to belittle your talent, but you are not to use it during an actual maneuver. You understand why?"

"Yes, sir. I guess I do."

"Better say that you are not to use it unless you think an error has been made—in which case you will speak up at once. But the printed tables remain the final authority."

"Aye aye, sir."

"Good. See me, please, in my room when you come off watch."

It was "day time" by the ship's clocks when he went off watch. He went to the passageway outside Dr. Hendrix's room and waited; there Ellie came across him. "Max!"

“Oh. Hello, Ellie.” He realized uncomfortably that he had not seen her since his tentative promotion.

“Hello he says!” She planted herself in front of him. “You’re a pretty sight—with your bloodshot eyes matching the piping on your shirt. Where have you been? Too good for your old friends? You haven’t even been to see Chipsie.”

He had been, once, although he had not run into Ellie. He had not repeated the visit because the shipmate who had replaced him had not liked being assigned as chambermaid to cows, sheep, llamas, *et al*; he had seemed to feel that it was Max’s fault. “I’m sorry,” Max said humbly, “but I haven’t had time.”

“A feeble excuse. Know what you are going to do now? You’re going straight to the lounge and I am going to trim your ears—I’ve figured out a way to box your favorite gambit that will leave you gasping.”

Max opened his mouth, closed it, opened it again. “No.”

“Speak louder. You used a word I don’t understand.”

“Look, Ellie, be reasonable. I’m waiting for Dr. Hendrix and as soon as he lets me go I’ve got to get some sleep. I’m about ten hours minus.”

“You can sleep any time.”

“Not when you’re standing four hours on and four off. You nap anytime you get a chance.”

She looked perplexed. “You don’t mean you work every other watch? Why, that’s criminal.”

“Maybe so but that’s how it is.”

“But—I’ll fix that! I’ll speak to the Captain.”

“Ellie! Don’t you dare!”

“Why not? Captain Blaine is old sugar pie. Never you mind, I’ll fix it.”

Max took a deep breath, then spoke carefully. “Ellie, don’t say anything to the Captain, not anything. It’s a big opportunity for me and I don’t mind. If you go tampering with things you don’t understand, you’ll ruin my chances. I’ll be sent back to the stables.”

“Oh, he wouldn’t do that.”

“You don’t understand. He may be an ‘old sugar pie’ to you; to me he is the Captain. So don’t.”

She pouted. “I was just trying to help.”

“I appreciate it. But don’t. And anyhow, I can’t come to the lounge, ever. It’s off limits for me.”

“But I thought—I think you’re just trying to avoid me. You run around up here now and you dress in pretty clothes. Why

not?"

They were interrupted by Dr. Hendrix returning to his room. "Morning, Jones. Good morning, Miss Coburn." He went on in.

Max said desperately, "Look, Ellie, I've got to go." He turned and knocked on the Astrogator's door.

Dr. Hendrix ignored having seen him with Ellie. "Sit down, Jones. That was a very interesting exhibition you put on." The Astrogator went on, "I'm curious to know how far your talent extends. Is it just to figures?"

"Why, I guess not, sir."

"Do you have to study hard to do it?"

"No, sir."

"Hmm … Well try something. Have you read—let me see—any of the plays of Shakespeare?"

"Uh, we had *Hamlet* and *As You Like It* in school, and I read *A Winter's Tale*. But I didn't like it," he answered honestly.

"In that case, I don't suppose you reread it. Remember any of it?"

"Oh, certainly, sir."

"Hmm—" Dr. Hendrix got down a limp volume.

"Let me see. Act two, scene three; Leontes says, 'Nor night nor day nor rest: it is but weakness … '"

Max picked it up. " … it is but weakness to bear the matter thus; mere weakness. If the cause were not in being …" He continued until stopped.

"That's enough. I don't care much for that play myself. Even the immortal Will had his off days. But how did you happen to have read that book of tables? Shakespeare at his dullest isn't that dull. I've never read them, not what one would call 'reading.'"

"Well, sir, Uncle Chet had his astrogation manuals at home after he retired and he used to talk with me a lot. So I read them."

"Do I understand that you have memorized the entire professional library of an astrogator?"

Max took a deep breath. "Well, sir, I've read them."

Dr. Hendrix took from his shelves his own tools of his profession. He did not bother with the binary tables, that being the one Max had shown that he knew. He leafed through them, asked Max questions, finally identifying what he wanted only by page number. He closed the last of them. "Whew!" he commented, and blinked. "While I am aware that there are numerous cases of your talent in the history of psychology, I

must admit it is disconcerting to encounter one." He smiled. "I wonder what Brother Witherspoon would think of this."

"Sir?"

"Our High Secretary. I'm afraid he would be shocked; he has conservative notions about protecting the 'secrets' of our profession."

Max said uncomfortably, "Am I likely to get into trouble, sir? I didn't know it was wrong to read Uncle's books."

"What? Nonsense. There are no 'secrets' to astrogation. You use these books on watch, so does every member of the 'Worry' gang. The passengers can read them, for all I care. Astrogation isn't secret; it is merely difficult. Few people are so endowed as to be able to follow accurately the mathematical reasoning necessary to plan a—oh, a transition, let us say. But it suits those who bother with guild politics to make it appear an arcane art—prestige, you know." Dr. Hendrix paused and tapped on his chair arm. "Jones, I want you to understand me. Kelly thinks you may shape up."

"Uh, that's good, sir."

"But don't assume that you know more than he does just because you have memorized the books."

"Oh, no, sir!"

"Actually, your talent isn't necessary in the control room. The virtues needed are those Kelly has—unflagging attention to duty, thorough knowledge of his tools, meticulous care for details, deep loyalty to his job and his crew and his ship and to those placed over him professionally. Kelly doesn't need eidetic memory, ordinary good memory combined with intelligence and integrity are what the job takes—and that's what I want in my control room."

"Yes, sir."

The Astrogator hesitated. "I don't wish to be offensive but I want to add this. Strange talents are sometimes associated with ordinary, or even inferior, mentality—often enough so that the psychologists use the term *'idiot savant.'* Sorry. You obviously aren't an idiot, but you are not necessarily a genius, even if you can memorize the Imperial Encyclopedia. My point is: I am more interested in your horse sense and your attention to duty than I am in your phenomenal memory."

"Uh, I'll try, sir."

"I think you'll make a good chartsman, in time." Dr. Hendrix indicated that the interview was over; Max got up. "One more thing."

“Yes, sir?”

“There are excellent reasons of discipline and efficiency why crew members do not associate with passengers.”

Max gulped. “I know, sir.”

“Mind your Ps and Qs. The members of my department are careful about this point—even then it is difficult.”

Max left feeling deflated. He had gone there feeling that he was about to be awarded something—even a chance to become an astrogator. He now felt sweated down to size.

10
GARSON'S PLANET

Max did not see much of Sam during the weeks following; the stiff schedule left him little time for visiting. But Sam had prospered.

Like all large ships, the *Asgard* had a miniature police force, experienced ratings who acted as the First Officer's deputies in enforcing ship's regulations. Sam, with his talent for politics and a faked certification as steward's mate first class, managed during the reshuffle following Max's transfer to be assigned as master-at-arms for the Purser's department. He did well, treading on no toes, shutting his eyes to such violations as were ancient prerogatives and enforcing those rules of sanitation, economy, and behavior which were actually needed for a taut, happy ship … all without finding it necessary to haul offenders up before the First Officer for punishment—which suited both Mr. Walther and the crew. When Stores Clerk Maginnis partook too freely of Mr. Gee's product and insisted on serenading his bunk mates, Sam merely took him to the galley and forced black coffee down him—then the following day took him down to 'H' deck, laid his own shield of office aside, and gave Maginnis a scientific going over that left no scars but deeply marked his soul. In his obscure past Sam had learned to fight, not rough house, not in the stylized mock combat of boxing, but in the skilled art in which an unarmed man becomes a lethal machine.

Sam had selected his victim carefully. Had he reported him, Maginnis would have regarded Sam as a snoop, a mere busybody to be outwitted or defied, and had the punishment been severe, he might have been turned into a permanent discipline problem—not forgetting that reporting Maginnis might also have endangered a sacred cow, Chief Steward Giordano. As it was, it turned Maginnis into Sam's strongest supporter and best publicist, as Maginnis's peculiar but not unique pride required him to regard the man who defeated him as "the hottest thing on two feet, sudden death in each hand, a *real* man! No nonsense about old Sam—try him yourself and see how *you* make out. Go on, I want to lay a bet."

It was not necessary for Sam to set up a second lesson.

A senior engineer's mate was chief master-at-arms and Sam's

nominal superior; these two constituted the police force of their small town. When the technician asked to go back to power room watch-standing and was replaced by an engineer's mate third, it was natural that Walther should designate Sam as Chief Master-at-Arms.

He had had his eye on the job from the moment he signed on. Any police chief anywhere has powers far beyond those set forth by law. As long as Sam stayed well-buttered up with Mr. Kuiper, Mr. Giordano, and (to a lesser extent) with Mr. Dumont, as long as he was careful to avoid exerting his authority in either the engineering spaces or the Worry Hole, he was the most powerful man in the ship—more powerful in all practical matters than the First Officer himself since he was the First Officer's visible presence.

Such was the situation when the ship grounded at Garson's Planet.

Garson's Planet appears to us to be a piece of junk left over when the universe was finished. It has a surface gravity of one-and-a-quarter, too much for comfort, it is cold as a moneylender's heart, and it has a methane atmosphere unbreathable by humans. With the sky swarming with better planets it would be avoided were it not an indispensable way station. There is only one survey Horst congruency near Earth's Sun and transition of it places one near Theta Centauri—and of the thirteen planets of that sun, Garson's Planet possesses the meager virtue of being least unpleasant.

But there are half a dozen plotted congruencies accessible to Theta Centauri, which makes Garson's Planet the inevitable cross-roads for trade of the Solar Union.

Max hit dirt there just once. Once was plenty. The colony at the space port, partly domed, partly dug in under the domes, was much like the Lunar cities and not unlike the burrows under any major Earth city, but to Max it was novel since he had never been on Luna and had never seen a big city on Terra other than Earthport. He went dirtside with Sam, dressed in his best and filled with curiosity. It was not necessary to put on a pressure suit; the port supplied each passenger liner with a pressure tube from ship's lock to dome lock.

Once inside, Sam headed down into the lower levels. Max protested, "Sam, let's go up and look around."

"Huh? Nothing there. A hotel and some expensive shops and clip joints for the pay passengers. Do you want to pay a month's wages for a steak?"

"No. I want to see *out.* Here I am on a strange planet and I haven't *seen* it at all. I couldn't see it from the control room when we landed and now I haven't seen anything but the inside of a trans tube and this." He gestured at the corridor walls.

"Nothing to see but a dirty, thick, yellow fog that never lifts. Worse than Venus. But suit yourself. I've got things to do, but if you don't want to stick with me you certainly don't have to."

Max decided to stick. They went on down and came out in a wide, lighted corridor not unlike that street in Earthport where Percy's restaurant was located, save that it was roofed over. There were the same bars, the same tawdry inducements for the stranger to part with cash, even to the tailor shop with the permanent "CLOSING OUT' sale. Several other ships were in and the sector was crowded. Sam looked around. "Now for a place for a quiet drink and a chat."

"How about there?" Max answered, pointing to a sign reading *THE BETTER 'OLE.* "Looks clean and cheerful."

Sam steered him quickly past it. "It is," he agreed, "but not for us."

"Why not?"

"Didn't you notice the customers? Imperial Marines."

"What of that? I've got nothing against the Imperials."

"Mmm … no," Sam agreed, still hurrying, "but those boys stick together and they have a nasty habit of resenting a civilian who has the bad taste to sit down in a joint they have staked out. Want to get your ribs kicked in?"

"Huh? That wouldn't happen if I minded my own business, would it?"

"Maybe. Maybe not. Suppose a hostess decides that you're cute—and the spit-and-polish boy she was with wants to make something of it? Max, you're a good boy—but there just ain't no demand for good boys. To stay out of trouble you have to stay away from it."

They threaded their way through the crowd for another hundred yards before Sam said, "Here we are—provided Lippy is still running the place." The sign read *THE SAFE LANDING;* it was larger but not as pleasant as *THE BETTER 'OLE.*

"Who's Lippy?"

"You probably won't meet him." Sam led the way in and picked out a table.

Max looked around. It looked like any other fifth-rate bar grille. "Could I get a strawberry soda here? I've had a hankering for one for ages—I used always to get one Saturdays when I

went to the Corners."

"They can't rule you out for trying."

"Okay. Sam, something you said—you remember the story you told me about your friend in the Imperials? Sergeant Roberts?"

"Who?"

"Or Richards. I didn't quite catch it."

"Never heard of the guy."

"But …"

"Never heard of him. Here's the waiter."

Nor had the humanoid Sirian waiter heard of strawberry soda. He had no facial muscles but his back skin crawled and rippled with embarrassed lack of comprehension. Max settled for something called "Old Heidelberg" although it had never been within fifty light-years of Germany. It tasted to Max like cold soap suds, but since Sam had paid for it he nursed it along and pretended to drink it.

Sam bounced up almost at once. "Sit tight, kid. I won't be long." He spoke to the barman, then disappeared toward the back. A young woman came over to Max's table.

"Lonely, spaceman?"

"Uh, not especially."

"But I am. Mind if I sit down?" She sank into the chair that Sam had vacated.

"Suit yourself. But my friend is coming right back."

She didn't answer but turned to the waiter at her elbow. "A brown special, Giggles."

Max made an emphatic gesture of denial. "No!"

"What's that, dear?"

"Look," Max answered, blushing, "I may look green as paint—I am, probably. But I don't buy colored water at house prices. I don't have much money."

She looked hurt. "But you have to order or I can't sit here."

"Well …" He glanced at the menu. "I could manage a sandwich, I guess."

She turned again to the waiter. "Never mind the special, Giggles. A cheese on rye and plenty of mustard." She turned back to Max. "What's your name, honey?"

"Max."

"Mine's Dolores. Where are you from?"

"The Ozarks. That's Earthside."

"Now isn't that a coincidence! I'm from Winnipeg—we're neighbors!"

Max decided that it might appear so, from that distance. But as Dolores babbled on it became evident that she knew neither the location of the Ozarks nor that of Winnipeg, had probably never been on Terra in her life. She was finishing the sandwich while telling Max that she just adored spacemen, they were so romantic, when Sam returned.

He looked down at her. "How much did you take him for?"

Dolores said indignantly, "That's no way to talk! Mr. Lipski doesn't permit …"

"Stow it, kid," Sam went on, not unkindly. "You didn't know that my partner is a guest of Lippy. Get me? No 'specials,' no 'pay-me's'—you're wasting your time. Now how much?"

Max said hastily, "It's okay, Sam. All I bought her was a sandwich."

"Well … all right. But you're excused, sister. Later, maybe."

She shrugged and stood up. "Thanks, Max."

"Not at all, Dolores. I'll say hello to the folks in Winnipeg."

"Do that."

Sam did not sit down. "Kid, I have to go out for a while."

"Okay."

Max started to rise, Sam motioned him back. "No, no. This I'd better do by myself. Wait here, will you? They won't bother you again—or if they do, ask for Lippy."

"I won't have any trouble."

"I hope not." Sam looked worried. "I don't know why I should fret, but there is something about you that arouses the maternal in me. Your big blue eyes I guess."

"Huh? Oh, go sniff space! Anyway, my eyes are brown."

"I was speaking," Sam said gently, "of the eyes of your dewy pink soul. Don't speak to strangers while I'm gone."

Max used an expression he had picked up from Mr. Gee; Sam grinned and left.

But Sam's injunction did not apply to Mr. Simes. Max saw the assistant astrogator appear in the doorway. His face was redder than usual and his eyes looked vague. He let his body revolve slowly as he surveyed the room. Presently his eyes lit on Max and he grinned unpleasantly.

"Well, well, well!" he said as he advanced toward Max. "If it isn't the Smart Boy."

"Good evening, Mr. Simes." Max stood up.

"So it's 'good evening, Mr. Simes'! But what did you say under your breath?"

"Nothing, sir."

“Humph! I know! But I think the same thing about you, only worse.” Max did not answer. Simes went on, “Well, aren’t you going to ask me to sit down?”

“Have a seat, sir,” Max said without expression.

“Well, what do you know? The Smart Boy wants me to sit with him.” He sat, called the waiter, ordered, and turned back to Max. “Smart Boy, do you know why I’m sitting with you?”

“No, sir.”

“To put a flea in your ear, that’s why. Since you pulled that hanky-panky with the computer, you’ve been Kelly’s hair-faired—fair-haired—boy. Fair-haired boy,” he repeated carefully. “That gets you nowhere with me. Get this straight: you go sucking around the Astrogator the way Kelly does and I’ll run you out of the control room. Understand me?”

Max felt himself losing his temper. “What do you mean by ‘hanky-panky,’ Mr. Simes?”

“You know. Probably memorized the last half dozen transitions—now you’ve got Kelly and the Professor thinking you’ve memorized the book. A genius in our midst! You know what that is? That’s a lot of …”

Fortunately for Max they were interrupted; he felt a firm hand on his shoulder and Sam’s quiet voice said, “Good evening, Mr. Simes.”

Simes looked confused, then recognized Sam and brightened. “Well, if it isn’t the copper. Sit down, Constable. Have a drink.”

“Don’t mind if I do.” Sam pulled up another chair.

“Do you know Smart Boy here?”

“I’ve seen him around.”

“Keep your eye on him. That’s an order. He’s very, very clever. Too clever. Ask him a number. Pick a number between one and ten.”

“Seven.”

Mr. Simes pounded the table. “What did I tell you? He memorized it before you got here. Someday he’s going to memorize one and they’ll stencil it across his chest. You know what, Constable? I don’t trust smart boys. They get ideas.”

Reinforced by Sam’s calming presence, Max kept quiet. Giggles had come to the table as soon as Sam joined them; Max saw Sam write something on the back of a menu and pass it with money to the humanoid. But Mr. Simes was too busy with his monologue to notice. Sam let him ramble on, then suddenly interrupted. “You seem to have a friend here, sir.”

“Huh? Where?”

Sam pointed. At the bar Dolores was smiling and gesturing at the assistant navigator to join her. Simes focused his eyes, grinned and said, “Why, so I do! It’s my Great Aunt Sadie.” He got up abruptly.

Sam brushed his hands together. “That disposes of that. Give you a bad time, kid?”

“Sort of. Thanks, Sam. But I hate to see him dumped on Dolores. She’s a nice kid.”

“Don’t worry about her. She’ll roll him for every thin he has on him—and a good job, too.” His eyes became hard. “I like an officer who acts like an officer. If he wants to pin one on, he should do it in his own part of town. Oh, well.” Sam relaxed. “Been some changes, eh, kid? Things are different from the way they were when we raised ship at Terra.”

“I’ll say they are!”

“Like it in the Worry gang?”

“It’s more fun than I ever had in my life. And I’m learning fast —so Mr. Kelly says. They’re a swell bunch— except for *him*.” He nodded toward Simes.

“Don’t let him worry you. The best soup usually has a fly in it. Just don’t let him get anything on you.”

“I sure don’t intend to.”

Sam looked at him, then said softly, “Ready to take the dive?”

“Huh?”

“I’m getting our stake together. We’ll be all set.”

Max found it hard to answer. He had known that his transfer had not changed anything basic; he was still in as much danger as ever. But he had been so busy with the joy of hard, interesting work, so dead for sleep when he was not working, that the subject had been pushed back in his mind. Now he drew patterns on the table in the sweat from the glasses and thought about it. “I wish,” he said slowly, “that there was some way to beat it.”

“There is a way, I told you. Your record gets lost.”

Max raised his eyes. “What good would that do? Sure, it would get me another trip. But I don’t want just another trip; I want to stay with it.” He looked down at the table top and carefully sketched an hyperboloid. “I’d better go with you. If I go back to Terra, it’s the labor companies for me—even if I stay out of jail.”

“Nonsense.”

“What?”

“Understand me, kid. I’d like to have you with me. A time like

that, having a partner at your elbow is the difference between—well, being down in the dumps and being on top. But you can stay in space, with a record as clean as a baby's."

"Huh? How?"

"Because you are changing guilds. Now only *one* paper has to get lost—your strike-out record with the stewards, cooks, and clerks. And they will never miss it because you aren't on their books, anyhow. You start fresh with the chartsmen and computers, all neat and legal."

Max sat still and was tempted. "How about the report to the Department of Guilds and Labor?"

"Same thing. Different forms to different offices. I checked. One form gets lost, the other goes in—and Steward's Mate Jones vanishes into limbo while Apprentice Chartsman Jones starts a clean record."

"Sam, why don't *you* do it? With the drag you've got now you could switch to … uh, well, to …"

"To what?" Sam shook his head sadly. "No, old son, there is nothing I can switch to. Besides, there are reasons why I had better be buried deep." He brightened. "Tell you what—I'll pick my new name before I take the jump and tell you. Then someday, two years, ten, twenty, you'll lay over at Nova Terra and look me up. We'll split a bottle and talk about when we were young and gay. Eh?"

Max smiled though he did not feel happy. "We will, Sam. We surely will." Then he frowned. "But, Sam, I don't know how to wangle the deal—and you'll be gone."

"I'll fix it before I leave. I've got Nelson eating out of my hand now. Like this: half cash down and half on delivery—and I'll fix it so that you have something on him—never mind what; you don't need to know yet. When you ground at Earthport, he asks you to mail the reports because you are going dirtside and he has work to finish. You check to see that the two reports you want are there, then you give him his pay off. Done."

Max said slowly, "I suppose that's best."

"Quit fretting. Everybody has a skeleton in the closet; the thing is to keep 'em there and not at the feast." He pushed an empty glass aside. "Kid, would you mind if we went back to the ship? Or had you planned to make a night of it?"

"No, I don't mind." Max's elation at setting foot on his first strange planet was gone—Garson's Hole was, he had to admit, a sorry sample of the Galaxy.

"Then let's get saddled up. I've got stuff to carry and I could

use help."

It turned out to be four fairly large bundles which Sam had cached in public lockers. "What are they?" Max asked curiously.

"Tea cozies, old son. Thousands of them. I'm going to sell 'em to Procyon pinheads as skull caps." Somewhat affronted, Max shut up.

Everything coming into the ship was supposed to be inspected, but the acting master-at-arms on watch at the lock did not insist on examining the items belonging to the Chief Master-at-Arms any more than he would have searched a ship's officer. Max helped Sam carry the bundles to the stateroom which was the prerogative of the ship's chief of police.

11
"THROUGH THE CARGO HATCH"

From Garson's Planet to Halcyon around Nu Pegasi is a double dogleg of three transitions, of 105, 487, and 19 light-years respectively to achieve a "straight line" distance of less than 250 light-years. But neither straight-line distance nor pseudo-distance of transition is important; the *Asgard* covered less than a light-year between gates. A distance "as the crow flies" is significant only to crows.

The first transition was barely a month out from Garson's Planet. On raising from there, Kelly placed Max on a watch in three, assigning him to Kelly's own watch, which gave Max much more sleep, afforded him as much instruction (since the watch with Simes was worthless instruction-wise), and kept Max out of Simes' way, to his enormous relief. Whether Kelly had planned that feature of it Max never knew—and did not dare ask.

Max's watch was still an instruction watch, he had no one to relieve nor to be relieved by. It became his habit not to leave the control room until Kelly did, unless told to do so. This resulted in him still being thrown into the company of Dr. Hendrix frequently, since the Astrogator relieved the Chief Computerman and Kelly would usually hang around and chat … during which time the Astrogator would sometimes inquire into Max's progress.

Occasionally the Captain would show up on Dr. Hendrix's watch. Shortly after leaving Garson's Planet, Dr. Hendrix took advantage of one such occasion to have Max demonstrate for Captain Blaine and First Officer Walther his odd talent. Max performed without a mistake although the Captain's presence made him most self-conscious. The Captain watched closely with an expression of gentle surprise. Afterwards he said, "Thank you, lad. That was amazing. Let me see—what is your name?"

"Jones, sir."

"Jones, yes." The old man blinked thoughtfully. "It must be terrifying not to be able to forget—especially in the middle of the night. Keep a clear conscience, son."

Twelve hours later, Dr. Hendrix said to him, “Jones, don’t go away. I want to see you.”

“Yes, sir.”

The Astrogator spoke with Kelly for a few moments, then again spoke to Max. “The Captain was impressed by your vaudeville act, Jones. He is wondering whether you have any parallel mathematical ability.”

“Well—no, sir. I’m not a lightning calculator, that is. I saw one in a sideshow once. He could do things I couldn’t.”

Hendrix brushed it aside. “Not important. I believe you told me that your uncle taught you some mathematical theory?”

“Just for astrogation, sir.”

“What do you think I am talking about? Do you know how to compute a transition approach?”

“Uh, I think so, sir.”

“Frankly, I doubt it, no matter how much theoretical drill Brother Jones gave you. But go ahead.”

“Now, sir?”

“Try it. Pretend you’re the officer of the watch. Kelly will be your assistant. I’ll just be audience. Work the approach we are on. I realize that we aren’t close enough for it to matter—but you are to assume that the safety of the ship depends on it.”

Max took a deep breath. “Aye aye, sir.” He started to get out fresh plates for the cameras.

Hendrix said, “No!”

“Sir?”

“If you have the watch, where’s your crew? Noguchi, help him.”

“Aye aye, sir.” Noguchi grinned and came over. While they were bending over the first camera, Noguchi whispered, “Don’t let him rattle you, pal. We’ll give him a good show. Kelly will help you over the humps.”

But Kelly did not help; he acted as “numbers boy” and nothing else, with no hint to show whether Max was right, or wildly wrong. After Max had his sights and had taken his comparison data between plates and charts he did not put the problem through the computer himself, but let Noguchi man the machine, with Kelly translating. After a long time and much sweat, the lights blinked what he hoped was the answer.

Dr. Hendrix said nothing but took the same plates to the tank and started to work the problem again, with the same crew. Very quickly the lights blinked on again; the Astrogator took the tables from Kelly and looked up the translation himself. “We

differ only in the ninth decimal place. Not bad."

"I was wrong only in the ninth place, sir?"

"I didn't say that. Perhaps I was more in error." Max started to grin, but Dr. Hendrix frowned. "Why didn't you take doppler spectra to check?" Max felt a cold chill.

"I guess I forgot, sir."

"I thought you were the man who never forgot?" Max thought intuitively—and correctly—that two kinds of memory were involved, but he did not have a psychologist's jargon with which to explain. One sort was like forgetting one's hat in a restaurant; that could happen to anyone. The other was being unable to recall what the mind had once known.

Hendrix went on, "A control room man must not forget things necessary to the safety of the ship. However, as an exercise you solved it very well—except that you have no speed. Had we been pushing close to the speed of light, ready to cross, your ship would have been in Hades and crashed in the River Styx before you got the answer. But it was a good first try."

He turned away. Kelly jerked his head toward the hatch and Max went below.

As he was falling asleep, Max turned over in his mind the notion that Dr. Hendrix might even be thinking of him for—Oh no! He put the thought aside. After all, Kelly could have done it; he had seen him do early approaches many times, and faster, too. Probably Noguchi could have done it.

Certainly Noguchi could have done it, he corrected. After all, there weren't any "secrets."

As they approached the first anomaly, the easy watch in three for officers and watch in four for the men changed to watch-and-watch, with an astrogator, an assistant, a chartsman, and a computerman on each watch. Max was at last assigned to a regular watch; the first watch was Dr. Hendrix assisted by Chartsman l/c Kovak, Max as chartsman of the watch and Noguchi on the computer; the other watch was Mr. Simes assisted by Chief Kelly, Smythe as chartsman and Lundy as computerman. Max noticed that Dr. Hendrix had assigned his "first team" to Simes and had taken the less experienced technicians himself. He wondered why, but was pleased not to be working for Simes.

He learned at last why they called it the "Worry Hole." Dr. Hendrix became a frozen-masked automaton, performing approach correction after correction and demanding quick,

accurate, and silent service. During the last twenty hours of the approach, the Astrogator never left the control room, nor did anyone else other than for short periods when nominally off watch. Simes continued to take his regular watch, but Dr. Hendrix hung over him, checking everything that he did. Twice he required the junior astrogator to re-perform portions of his work and once elbowed him aside and did it himself. The first time it happened Max stared—then he noticed that the others were careful to be busy doing something else whenever Dr. Hendrix spoke privately to Simes.

The tension grew as the critical instant approached. The approach to an anomalous intraspatial transition can hardly be compared to any other form of piloting ever performed by human beings, though it might be compared to the impossible trick of taking off in an atmosphere plane, flying a thousand miles blind—while performing dead reckoning so perfectly as to fly through a narrow tunnel at the far end, without ever seeing the tunnel. A Horst congruency cannot be seen, it can only be calculated by abstruse mathematics of effects of mass on space; a "gateway" is merely unmarked empty space in vaster emptiness. In approaching a planet an astrogator can see his destination, directly or by radar, and his speed is just a few miles per second. But in making a Horstian approach the ship's speed approaches that of light—and reaches it, at the last instant. The nearest landmarks are many billions of miles away, the landmarks themselves are moving with stellar velocities and appear to be crowding together in the exaggerated parallax effects possible only when the observer is moving almost as fast as is his single clue to location and speed—the wave fronts of the electromagnetic spectrum.

Like searching at midnight in a dark cellar for a black cat that isn't there.

Toward the last, Kelly himself was on the computer with Lundy at his ear. Smythe and Kovak were charting, passing new data to Dr. Hendrix, who was programming orally to the computer crew, setting up the problems in his head and feeding them to the electronic brain almost without delay. The power room was under his direct control now; he had a switch led out from the control console in each hand, one to nurse the ship along just below speed of light, the other to give the *Asgard* the final kick that would cause her to burst through.

Max was pushed aside, no task remained in which there was not someone more experienced. On a different level, Simes too

had been pushed aside; there was place for only one astrogator at the moment of truth.

Of all those in the Worry Hole, only Captain Blaine seemed to be relaxed. He sat in the chair sacred to him, smoking quietly and watching Hendrix. The Astrogator's face was gray with fatigue, greasy with unwashed sweat. His uniform was open at the collar and looked slept in, though he certainly had not slept. Max looked at him and wondered why he had ever longed to be an astrogator, ever been foolish enough to wish to bear this undivided and unendurable burden.

But the doctor's crisp voice showed no fatigue; the endless procession of numbers marched out, sharp as print, each spoken so that there could be no mistake, no need to repeat, "nine" always sounded as one syllable, "five" always stretched into two. Max listened and learned and wondered.

He glanced up through the dome, out into space itself, space shown distorted by their unthinkable speed. The stars ahead, or above, had been moving closer together for the past several watches, the huge parallax effect displacing them to the eye so that they seemed to be retreating in the very sector of the sky they were approaching. They were seeing by infrared waves now, ploughing into oncoming wave trains so fast that doppler effect reduced heat wavelengths to visible light.

The flood of figures stopped. Max looked down, then looked up hastily as he heard Dr. Hendrix say, "Stand by!"

The stars seemed to crawl together, then instantly they were gone to be replaced without any lapse of time whatever by another, new and totally different starry universe.

Hendrix straightened up and sighed, then looked up. "There's the Albert Memorial," he said quietly. "And there is the Hexagon. Well, Captain, it seems we made it again." He turned to Simes. "Take it, Mister." He let the Captain go first, then followed him down the hatch.

The control gang went back to easy watches; the next transition was many days away. Max continued as chartsman-of-the-watch in place of Kovak, who temporarily replaced Dr. Hendrix while the Astrogator got a week of rest. There was truly not much to do during the early part of a leg and the doctor's superb skill was not needed. But Max greatly enjoyed the new arrangements; it made him proud to sign the rough log "M. Jones, Chtsmn o/W." He felt that he had arrived—even though Simes found fault with him and Kelly continued to drill him unmercifully in control room arts.

He was surprised but not apprehensive when he was told, during an off-watch period, to report to the Astrogator. He put on a fresh uniform, slicked his hair down, and went above "C" deck. "Apprentice Chartsman Jones reporting, sir."

Kelly was there, having coffee with the Astrogator. Hendrix acknowledged Max's salutation but left him standing. "Yes, Jones." He turned to Kelly. "Suppose you break the news."

"If you say so, sir." Kelly looked uncomfortable. "Well, Jones, it's like this—you don't really belong in my guild."

Max was so shocked that he could not answer. He was about to say that he had thought—he had understood—he hadn't known—But he got nothing out; Kelly continued, "The fact is, you ought to buck for astrogator. The Doctor and I have been talking it over."

The buzzing in his head got worse. He became aware that Dr. Hendrix was repeating, "Well, Jones? Do you want to try it? Or don't you?"

Max managed to say, "Yes. Yes, sir."

"Good. Kelly and I have been watching you. He is of the opinion and so am I that you may, just possibly, have the latent ability to develop the skill and speed necessary. The question is: do *you* think so?"

"Uh … that is—I hope so, sir!"

"So do I," Hendrix answered dryly. "We shall see. If you haven't, you can revert to your own guild and no harm is done. The experience will make you a better chartsman." The Astrogator turned to Kelly. "I'll quiz Jones a bit, Kelly. Then we can make up our minds."

"Very good, sir." Kelly stood up.

When the Chief Computerman had gone Hendrix turned to his desk, hauled out a crewman's personal record. To Max he said harshly, "Is this yours?"

Max looked at it and gulped. "Yes, sir."

Dr. Hendrix held his eye. "Well? How good a picture is it of your career thus far? Any comment you want to make?"

The pause might have been a dozen heart beats, though to Max it was an endless ordeal. Then a catharsis came bursting up out of him and he heard himself answering, "It's not a good picture at all, sir. It's phony from one end to the other."

Even as he said it, he wondered why. He felt that he had kicked to pieces his one chance to achieve his ambition. Yet, instead of feeling tragic, he felt oddly relaxed.

Hendrix put the personal record back on his desk. "Good," he

answered. “Very good. If you had given any other answer, I would have run you out of my control room. Now, do you want to tell me about it? Sit down.”

So Max sat down and told him. All that he held back was Sam’s name and such details as would have identified Sam. Naturally, Dr. Hendrix noticed the omission and asked him point blank.

“I won’t tell you, sir.”

Hendrix nodded. “Very well. Let me add that I shall make no attempt to identify this, ah, friend of yours—if by chance he is in this ship.”

“Thank you, sir.”

There followed a considerable silence. At last Hendrix said, “Son, what led you to attempt this preposterous chicanery? Didn’t you realize you would be caught?”

Max thought about it. “I guess I knew I would be, sir—eventually. But I wanted to space and there wasn’t any other way to do it.” When Hendrix did not answer Max went on. After the first relief of being able to tell the truth, he felt defensive, anxious to justify himself—and just a little bit irked that Dr. Hendrix did not see that he had simply done what he *had* to do—so it seemed to Max. “What would you have done, sir?”

“Me? How can I answer that? What you’re really asking is: do I consider your actions morally wrong, as well as illegal?”

“Uh, I suppose so, sir.”

“Is it wrong to lie and fake and bribe to get what you want? It’s worse than wrong, it’s undignified!”

Dr. Hendrix chewed his lip and continued. “Perhaps that opinion is the sin of the Pharisees … my own weakness. I don’t suppose that a young, penniless tramp, such as you described yourself to be, can afford the luxury of dignity. As for the rest, human personality is a complex thing, nor am I a judge. Admiral Lord Nelson was a liar, a libertine, and outstandingly undisciplined. President Abraham Lincoln was a vulgarian and nervously unstable. The list is endless. No, Jones, I am not going to pass judgment; you must do that yourself. The authorities having jurisdiction will reckon your offenses; I am concerned only with whether or not you have the qualities I need.”

Max’s emotions received another shock. He had already resigned himself to the idea that he had lost his chance. “Sir?”

“Don’t misunderstand me.” Hendrix tapped the forged record. “I don’t like this. I don’t like it at all. But perhaps you can live down your mistake. In the meantime, I badly need another

watch officer; if you measure up, I can use you. Part of it is personal, too; your uncle taught me, I shall try to teach you."

"Uh, I'll try, sir. Thank you."

"Don't thank me. I'm not even feeling particularly friendly to you, at the moment. Don't talk with anyone. I'll ask the Captain to call a guild meeting and he and Mr. Simes and I will vote on you. We'll make you a probationary apprentice which will permit the Captain to appoint you to the temporary rank of merchant cadet. The legalities are a bit different from those of the usual route as you no doubt know."

Max did not know, though he was aware that officers sometimes came up "through the cargo hatch"—but another point hit him. "Mr. Simes, sir?"

"Certainly. By this procedure, all the astrogators you serve with must pass on you."

"Uh, does it have to unanimous, sir?"

"Yes."

"Then—Well, sir, you might as well forget it. I mean, I appreciate your willingness to, uh, but …" His voice trailed off.

Dr. Hendrix smiled mirthlessly. "Hadn't you better let me worry about that?"

"Oh. Sorry, sir."

"When it has been logged, I'll notify you. Or 'when and if,' if you prefer."

"Yes, sir." Max stood up. "Sir? There were, uh, a couple of other things I wondered about."

Hendrix had turned back to his desk. He answered, "Well?" somewhat impatiently.

"Would you mind telling me—just for my curiosity—how you caught me?"

"Oh, that. No doubt you've given yourself away to several people. I'm sure Kelly knows, from the subjects he avoided. For example, I once heard Lundy mention to you Kiefer's Bitz on Luna. Your answer, though noncommittal, implied that you did not really know what dive he was talking about—and it is impossible for a spaceman not to know that place, its entrance faces the east lock to the space port."

"Oh."

"But the matter came to the top of my mind in connection with this." He again indicated the false record. "Jones, I deal in figures and my mind can no more help manipulating them for all the information they contain than I can help breathing. This record says that you went to space a year before your uncle

retired— I remember what year that was. But you told me that your uncle had trained you at home and your performance bore out that statement. Two sets of alleged facts were contradictory; need I add that I was fairly sure of the truth?"

"Oh. I guess I wasn't very smart."

"No, you weren't. Figures are sharp things, Jones. Don't juggle them, you'll get cut. What was the other matter?"

"Well, sir, I was kind of wondering what was going to happen to me. I mean about *that."*

"Oh," Hendrix answered indifferently, "that's up to the Stewards & Clerks. My guild won't take action concerning a disciplinary matter of another guild. Unless, of course, they call it 'moral turpitude' and make it stick."

With that faint comfort Max left. Nevertheless, he felt easier than he had at any time since he had signed on. The prospect of punishment seemed less a burden than constantly worrying about getting caught. Presently he forgot it and exulted in the opportunity—at last!—to take a crack at astrogator.

He wished he could tell Sam … or Ellie.

12
HALCYON

The probationary appointment was logged later that same day. The Captain called him in, swore him in, then congratulated him and called him “Mister” Jones. The ceremony was simple, with no spectator but Hendrix and the Captain’s secretary.

The commonplaces attendant on the change were, for a while, more startling to Max than the promotion itself. They started at once. “You had better take the rest of the day to shake down, Mr. Jones,” the Captain said, blinking vaguely. “Okay, Doc?”

“Certainly, sir.”

“Good. Bennett, will you ask Dumont to step in?”

The Chief Passengers’ Steward was unblinkingly unsurprised to find the recent steward’s mate third a ship’s officer. To the Captain’s query he said, “I was planning to put Mr. Jones in stateroom B-014, sir. Is that satisfactory?”

“No doubt, no doubt.”

“I’ll have boys take care of his luggage at once.”

“Good. You trot along with Dumont, Mr. Jones. No, wait a moment. We must find you a cap.” The Captain went to his wardrobe, fumbled around. “I had one that would do here somewhere.”

Hendrix had been standing with his hands behind him. “I fetched one, Captain. Mr. Jones and I wear the same size, I believe.”

“Good. Though perhaps his head has swelled a bit in the past few minutes. Eh?”

Hendrix grinned savagely. “If it has, I’ll shrink it.” He handed the cap to Max. The wide gold strap and sunburst of the Astrogator had been removed; substituted was a narrow strap with tiny sunburst surrounded by the qualifying circle of the apprentice. Max thought it must be old insignia saved for sentimental reasons by Hendrix himself. He choked up as he mumbled his thanks, then followed Dumont out of the Captain’s cabin, stumbling over his feet.

When they reached the companionway Dumont stopped. “There is no need to go down to the bunkroom, sir. If you will tell me the combination of your locker, we’ll take care of everything.”

“Oh, gee, Mr. Dumont! I’ve got just a small amount of truck. I can carry it up myself.”

Dumont’s face had the impassivity of a butler’s. “If I may make a suggestion, sir, you might like to see your stateroom while I have the matter taken care of.” It was not a question; Max interpreted it correctly to mean: *“Look, dummy, I know the score and you don’t. Do what I tell you before you make a terrible break!”*

Max let himself be guided. It is not easy to make the jump from crewman to officer while remaining in the same ship. Dumont knew this, Max did not. Whether his interest was fatherly, or simply a liking for correct protocol—or both—Dumont did not intend to allow the brand-new junior officer to go lower than “C” deck until he had learned to carry his new dignity with grace. So Max sought out stateroom B-014.

The bunk had a real foam mattress and a spread. There was a tiny wash basin with running water and a mirror. There was a bookshelf over the bunk and a wardrobe for his uniforms. There was even a shelf desk that let down for his convenience. There was a telephone on the wall, a buzzer whereby he could summon the steward’s mate on watch! There was a movable chair all his own, a wastebasket, and—yes!—a little rug on the deck. And best of all, there was a door with a lock.

The fact that the entire room was about as large as a piano box bothered him not at all.

He was opening drawers and poking into things when Dumont returned. Dumont was not carrying Max’s meager possessions himself; that task was delegated to one of his upper-decks staff. The steward’s mate followed Dumont in and said, “Where shall I put this, sir?”

Max realized with sudden embarrassment that the man waiting on him had eaten opposite him for past months. “Oh! Hello, Jim. Just dump it on the bunk. Thanks a lot.”

“Yes, sir. And congratulations!”

“Uh, thanks!” They shook hands. Dumont let that proper ceremony persist for a minimum time, then said, “That’s all now, Gregory. You can go back to the pantry.” He turned to Max. “Anything else, sir?”

“Oh, no, everything is fine.”

“May I suggest that you probably won’t want to sew insignia on these uniforms yourself? Unless you are better with a needle than I am,” Dumont added with just the right chuckle.

“Well, I guess I could.”

“Mrs. Dumont is handy with a needle, taking care of the lady passengers as she does. Suppose I take this one? It can be ready and pressed in time for dinner.”

Max was happy to let him. He was suddenly appalled by a terrifying notion—he was going to have to eat in the Bifrost Lounge!

But there were further disturbances before dinner. He was completing the small task of stowing his possessions when there came a knock on the door, followed immediately by someone coming in. Max found himself nose to nose with Mr. Simes.

Simes looked at the cap on his head and laughed. “Take that thing off before you wear out your ears.”

Max did not do so. He said, “You wanted me, sir?”

“Yes. Just long enough, Smart Boy, to give you a word of advice.”

“Yes?”

Simes tapped himself on the chest. “Just this. There is only one assistant astrogator in this ship—and I’m it. Remember that. I’ll still be it long after you’ve been busted back to sweeping up after cows. Which is where you belong.”

Max felt a flush crawl up his neck and burn his cheeks. “Why,” he asked, “if you think that, didn’t you veto my appointment?”

Simes laughed again. “Do I look like a fool? The Captain says yes, the Astrogator says yes—should I stick my neck out? It’s easier to wait and let you stick your neck out—which you will. I just wanted to let you know that a dinky piece of gold braid doesn’t mean a thing. You’re still junior to me by plenty. Don’t forget it.”

Max clenched his jaw and did not answer. Simes went on, “Well?”

“‘Well’ what?”

“I just gave you an order.”

“Oh. Aye aye, Mr. Simes. I won’t forget it. I certainly won’t.”

Simes looked at him sharply, said, “See that you don’t,” and left. Max was still facing his door, clenching his fists, when Gregory tapped on the door. “Dinner, sir. Five minutes.”

Max delayed as long as he could, wishing mightily that he could slide down to Easy deck and take his usual place in the warm, noisy, relaxed comfort of the crew’s mess. He hesitated in the lounge doorway, paralyzed with stage fright. The beautiful room was blazing with fight and looked unfamiliar; he had

never been in it save in early morning, to change the sandbox located down the pantry passage—at which times only standing lights were burning.

He was barely in time; some of the ladies were seated but the Captain was still standing. Max realized that he should be near his chair, ready to sit down when the Captain did—or as soon as the ladies were seated, he amended—but where should he go? He was still jittering when he heard his name shouted. "Max!"

Ellie came running up and threw her arms around his neck. "Max! I just heard. I think it's *wonderful!"* She looked at him, her eyes shining, then kissed him on both cheeks.

Max blushed to his ears. He felt as if every eye was turned on him—and he was right. To add to his embarrassment, Ellie was dressed in formal evening dress of Hesperan high style, which not only made her look older and much more female, but also shocked his puritanical hillbilly standards.

She let go of him, which was well but left him in danger of collapsing at the knees. She started to babble something, Max did not know what, when Chief Steward Dumont appeared at her elbow. "The Captain is waiting, Miss," he said firmly.

"Bother to the Captain! Oh, well—see you after dinner, Max." She headed for the Captain's table. Dumont touched Max's sleeve and murmured, "This way, sir."

His place was at the foot of the Chief Engineer's table. Max knew Mr. Compagnon by sight but had never spoken to him. The Chief glanced up and said, "Evening, Mr. Jones. Glad to have you with us. Ladies and gentlemen, our new astrogation officer, Mr. Jones. On your right, Mr. Jones, is Mrs. Daigler. Mr. Daigler on her right, then—" and so on, around the table: Dr. and Mrs. Weberbauer and their daughter Rebecca, Mr. and Mrs. Scott, a Mr. Arthur, Senhor and Senhora Vargas.

Mrs. Daigler thought it was *lovely,* his being promoted. And so *nice* to have more young people at the table. She was much older than Max but young enough to be handsome and aware of it. She wore more jewels than Max had ever seen and her hair was lacquered into a structure a foot high and studded with pearls. She was as perfectly finished and as expensive as a precision machine and she made Max uncomfortable.

But he was not yet as uncomfortable as he could be. Mrs. Daigler produced a wisp of a handkerchief from her bosom, moistened it and said, "Hold still, Mr. Jones." She scrubbed his cheek. 'Turn your head." Blushing, Max complied.

"There, that's better," Mrs. Daigler announced. "Mama fixed."

She turned away and said, “Don’t you think, Mr. Compagnon, that science, with all the wonderful things they do these days, could discover a lip paint that wouldn’t come off?”

“Stop it, Maggie,” her husband interrupted. “Pay no attention, Mr. Jones. She’s got a streak of sadism as wide as she is.”

“George, you’ll pay for that. Well, Chief?”

The Chief Engineer patted his lips with snowy linen. “I think it must already have been invented, but there was no market. Women like to brand men, even temporarily.”

“Oh, bosh!”

“It’s a woman’s world, ma’am.”

She turned to Max. “Eldreth is a dear, isn’t she? I suppose you knew her ‘dirtside’?—as Mr. Compagnon calls it.”

“No, ma’am.”

“Then how? I mean, after all, there isn’t much opportunity. Or is there?”

“Maggie, stop pestering him. Let the man eat his dinner.”

Mrs. Weberbauer on his other side was as easy and motherly as Mrs. Daigler was difficult. Under her soothing presence, Max managed to start eating. Then he noticed that the way he grasped a fork was not the way the others did, tried to change, made a mess of it, became aware of his untidy nails, and wanted to crawl under the table. He ate about three hundred calories, mostly bread and butter.

At the end of the meal, Mrs. Daigler again gave her attention to him, though she addressed the Chief Engineer. “Mr. Compagnon, isn’t it customary to toast a promotion?”

“Yes,” the Chief conceded. “But he must pay for it. That’s a requirement.”

Max found himself signing a chit presented by Dumont. The price made him blink—his first trip might be a professional success, but so far it had been financial disaster. Champagne, iced in a shiny bucket, accompanied the chit and Dumont cut the wires and drew the cork with a flourish.

The Chief Engineer stood up. “Ladies and gentlemen—I give you Astrogator Jones. May he never misplace a decimal point!”

“Cheers!”—“Bravo!”—“Speech, speech!”

Max stumbled to his feet and muttered, “Thank you.”

His first watch was at eight o’clock the next morning. He ate breakfast alone and reflected happily that as a watch stander he would usually eat either before or after the passengers. He was in the control room a good twenty minutes early.

Kelly glanced up and said, “Good morning, sir.”

Max gulped. “Er—good morning, Chief!” He caught Smythe grinning behind the computer, turned his eyes hastily away.

“Fresh coffee, Mr. Jones. Will you have a cup?” Max let Kelly pour for him; while they drank Kelly quietly went over the details—acceleration schedule, position and vector, power units in use, sights taken, no special orders, etc. Noguchi relieved Smythe, and shortly before the hour Dr. Hendrix appeared.

“Good morning, sir.”

“Good morning, Doctor.”

“Morning.” Hendrix accepted coffee, turned to Max. “Have you relieved the officer of the watch?”

“Uh, why no, sir.”

“Then do so. It lacks less than a minute of eight.”

Max turned to Kelly and shakily saluted. “I relieve you, sir.”

“Very well, sir.” Kelly went below at once. Dr. Hendrix sat down, took out a book and started to read. Max realized with a chilly feeling that he had been pushed in, to swim or not. He took a deep breath and went over to Noguchi. “Noggy, let’s get the plates ready for the middle o’ watch sights.”

Noguchi glanced at the chronometer. “As you say, sir.”

“Well … I guess it is early. Let’s take a few dopplers.”

“Aye aye, sir.” Noguchi climbed out of the saddle where he had been loafing.

Max said in a low voice, “Look, Noggy, you don’t have to say ‘sir’ to me.”

Noguchi answered just as quietly. “Kelly wouldn’t like it if I didn’t. Better let it ride.”

“Oh.” Max frowned. “Noggy? How does the rest of the Worry gang feel about it?”

Noguchi did not pretend not to understand. He answered, “Shucks, they’re all rooting for you, if you can swing it.”

“You’re sure?”

“Certain. Just as long as you don’t try to make a big hairy thing out of yourself like—well, like some I could mention.” The computerman added, “Maybe Kovak isn’t exactly cheering. He’s been having a watch of his own, you know—for the first time.”

“He’s sore?”

“Not exactly. He couldn’t expect to keep it long anyhow, not with a transition coming up. He won’t go out of his way to give you trouble, he’ll be fair.”

Max made a mental note to see what he could do to swing Kovak over to his side. The two manned the dopplerscope, took

readings on stars forward of vector, checked what they found by spectrostellograph, and compared both with standard plates from the chart safe. At first Max had to remember that he was in charge; then he got so interested in fussy details of measurements that he was no longer self-conscious. At last Noguchi touched his sleeve. “Pushing ten o’clock, sir. I’d better get set up.”

“Huh? Sure, go ahead.” He reminded himself not to help Noggy; the chartsman has his prerogatives, too. But he checked the set up just as Hendrix always did, as Simes rarely did, and as Kelly sometimes did, depending on who had made it.

After they had gotten the new data Max programmed the problem on paper (there being plenty of time), then called it off to Noguchi at the computer.

He thumbed the book himself, there being no “numbers boy” available. The figures were as clear in his recollection as ever, but he obeyed Hendrix’s injunction not to depend on memory.

The result worried him. They were not “in the groove.” Not that the *Asgard* was far out, but the discrepancy was measurable. He checked what he had done, then had Noguchi run the problem again, using a different programming method. The result came out the same.

Sighing, he computed the correction and started to take it to Hendrix for approval. But the Astrogator still paid no attention; he sat at the console, reading a novel from the ship’s library.

Max made up his mind. He went to the console and said, “Excuse me, sir. I need to get there for a moment.” Hendrix got up without answering and found another seat. Max sat down and called the power room. “Control officer speaking. I intend to increase boost at eleven o’clock. Stand by for time check.”

Hendrix must have heard him, he thought, but the Astrogator gave no sign. Max fed in the correction, set the control chronometer to execute his wishes at eleven plus-or-minus nothing.

Shortly before noon Simes showed up. Max had already written his own log, based on Noguchi’s log, and had signed it “M. Jones.” He had hesitated, then added “C. O. o/W.” Simes went to Dr. Hendrix, saluted, and said, “Ready to relieve you, sir.”

Hendrix spoke his first word since eight o’clock. “He’s got it.”

Simes looked non-plussed, then went to Max. “Ready to relieve you.” Max recited off the situation data while Simes read the log and the order book. Simes interrupted him while he was

still listing minor ship's data. "Okay, I relieve you. Get out of my control room, Mister." Max got out. Dr. Hendrix had already gone down.

Noguchi had loitered at the foot of the ladder. He caught Max's eye, made a circle with thumb and finger and nodded. Max grinned at him, started to ask a question; he wanted to know if that discrepancy was a booby trap, intentionally left in by Kelly. Then he decided that it would not be fitting; he'd ask Kelly himself, or figure it from the records. "Thanks, Noggy."

That watch turned out to be typical only in the one respect that Dr. Hendrix continued to require Max to be officer of the watch himself. He did not again keep quiet but rode Max steadily, drilling him hour after hour, requiring him to take sights and set up problems continuously, as if the *Asgard* were actually close to transition. He did not permit Max to program on paper but forced him to pretend that time was too short and that data must immediately go into the computer, be acted on at once. Max sweated, with remote controls in each fist and with Hendrix himself acting as "numbers boy." The Astrogator kept pushing him for speed, speed, and more speed—never at the sacrifice of accuracy, for any error was unforgivable. But the goal was always greater speed.

Once Max objected. "Sir, if you would let me put it right into the machine, I could cut it down a lot."

Hendrix snapped, "When you have your own control room, you can do that, if you think it wise. Now you'll do it *my* way."

Occasionally Kelly would take over as his supervisor. The Chief Computerman was formal, using such phrases as, "May I suggest, sir—" or "I think I'd do it this way, sir." But once he broke out with, "Confound it, Max! Don't ever pull a dumb stunt like that!"

Then he started to amend his remarks. Max grinned. "Please, Chief. For a moment you made me feel at home. Thanks."

Kelly looked sheepish. "I'm tired, I guess. I could do with a smoke and some Java."

While they were resting, Max noted that Lundy was out of earshot and said, "Chief? You know more than I'll ever learn. Why didn't *you* buck for astrogator? Didn't you ever get a chance?"

Kelly suddenly looked bleak. "I once did," he said stiffly. "Now I know my limitations." Max shut up, much embarrassed. Thereafter, Kelly reverted to calling him Max whenever they were alone.

Max did not see Sam for more than a week after he moved up to Baker deck. Even then the encounter was chance; he ran across him outside the Purser's office. "Sam!"

"Good morning, sir!" Sam drew up in a smart salute with a broad grin on his face.

"Huh? 'Good morning, sir' my foot! How's it going, Sam?"

"Aren't you going to return my salute? In my official capacity I can report you, you know. The Captain is very, very fussy about ship's etiquette."

Max made a rude noise. "You can hold that salute until you freeze, you clown."

Sam relaxed. "Kid, I've been meaning to get up and congratulate you—but every time I find you're on watch. You must live in the Worry Hole."

"Pretty near. Look, I'll be off this evening until midnight. What do you say I stop down to see you?"

Sam shook his head. "I'll be busy."

"Busy how? You expecting a jail break? Or a riot, maybe?"

Sam answered soberly, "Kid, don't get me wrong—but you stick to your end of the ship and I'll stick to mine. No, no, keep quiet and listen. I'm as proud as if I had invented you. But you can't fraternize in crew's quarters, not even with the Chief Master-at-Arms. Not yet."

"Who'll know? Who's to care?"

"You know blamed well that Giordano would love to tell Kuiper that you didn't know how to behave like an officer—and Old Lady Kuiper would pass it along to the Purser. Take my advice. Have I ever thrown you a curve?"

Max dropped the matter, though he badly wanted a chin with Sam. He needed to tell him that his faked record had been breached and to consult with him as to probable consequences.

Of course, he considered as he returned to his stateroom, there wasn't a thing to keep him from carrying out his original intention of jumping ship with Sam at Nova Terra—except that it was now no longer possible to imagine it. He was an officer.

They were approaching the middle transition; the control room went on watch-and-watch. But still Dr. Hendrix did not take the watch; Simes and Jones alternated. The Astrogator stood every watch with Max but required him to do the work and carry the responsibility himself. Max sweated it out and learned that practice problems and study of theory were nothing

like having it matter when he had no way and no time to check. You had to be *right,* every time—and there was always doubt.

When, during the last twenty-four hours, the Worry gang went on continuous watch, Max thought that Dr. Hendrix would push him aside. But he did not. Simes was pushed aside, yes, but Max took the worry seat, with Hendrix bending over him and watching everything he did, but not interfering. "Great heavens!" Max thought. "Surely he isn't going to let me make this transition? I'm not ready for it, not yet. I'll never keep up."

But data was coming too fast for further worry; he had to keep processing it, see the answers, and make decisions. It was not until twenty minutes before transition that Hendrix pushed him aside without a word and took over. Max was still recovering when they burst through into a new sky.

The last approach-and-transition before Halcyon was much like the second. There were a couple of weeks of easy watches, headed by Simes, Jones, and Kovak, with both Kelly and Hendrix getting a little rest. Max liked it, both on and off watch. On watch he continued to practice, trying to achieve the inhuman speed of Dr. Hendrix. Off watch he slept and enjoyed himself. The Bifrost Lounge no longer terrified him. He now played three-dee with Ellie there, with Chipsie on his shoulder, giving advice. Ellie had long since waved her eyes at Captain Blaine and convinced him that a pet so well-behaved, so well house-broken, and in particular so well-mannered (she had trained the spider puppy to say, "Good morning, Captain," whenever it saw Blaine)—in all respects so civilized should not be forced to live in a cage.

Max had even learned to swap feeble repartee with Mrs. Daigler, thinking up remarks and waiting for a chance. Ellie was threatening to teach him to dance, although he managed to stall her until resumption of watch-and-watch before transition made it impossible.

Again he found himself shoved into the worry seat for the last part of the approach. This time Dr. Hendrix did not displace him until less than ten minutes before burst through.

On the easy drop down to Halcyon Ellie's determination won out. Max learned to dance. He found that he liked it. He had good rhythm, did not forget her instructions, and Ellie was a fragrant, pleasant armful.

"I've done all I can," she announced at last. "You're the best

dancer with two left feet I've ever met." She required him to dance with Rebecca Weberbauer and with Mrs. Daigler. Mrs. Daigler wasn't so bad after all, as long as she kept her mouth shut—and Rebecca was cute. He began to look forward to the fleshpots of Halcyon, that being Ellie's stated reason for instructing him; he was to be conscripted as her escort.

Only one thing marred the final leg; Sam was in trouble. Max did not find out about it until after the trouble broke. He got up early to go on watch and found Sam cleaning decks in the silent passages of passenger quarters. He was in dungarees and wearing no shield. "Sam!"

Sam looked up. "Oh. Hi, kid. Keep your voice down, you'll wake people."

"But Sam, what in Ned are you doing?"

"Me? I seem to be manicuring this deck."

"But why?"

Sam leaned on his broom. "Well, kid, it's like this. The Captain and I had a difference of opinion. He won."

"You've been busted?"

"Your intuition is dazzling."

"What happened?"

"Max, the less you know about it the better. Don't fret. *Sic transit gloria mundi*—Tuesday is usually worse."

"But—See here, I've got to grab chow and go on watch. I'll look you up later."

"Don't."

Max got the story from Noguchi. Sam, it appeared, had set up a casino in an empty storeroom. He might have gotten away with it indefinitely had it remained a cards-and-dice set up, with a rake off for the house—the "house" being the Chief Master-at-Arms. But Sam had added a roulette wheel and that had been his downfall; Giordano had come to suspect that the wheel had less of the element of chance than was customary in better-run gambling halls—and had voiced his suspicion to Chief Clerk Kuiper. From there events took an inevitable course.

"When did he put in this wheel?"

"Right after we raised from Garson's Planet." Max thought uncomfortably of the "tea cozies" he had helped Sam bring aboard there. Noguchi went on, "Uh, didn't you know, sir? I thought you and him were pretty close before—you know, before you moved up decks."

Max avoided an answer and dug into the log. He found it under the previous day, added by Bennett to Simes' log. Sam

was restricted to the ship for the rest of the trip, final disciplinary action postponed until return to Terra.

That last seemed to mean that Captain Blaine intended to give Sam a chance to show good behavior before making his recommendation to the guilds—the Captain was a sweet old guy, he certainly was. But "restricted"? Then Sam would never get his chance to run away from whatever it was he was running away from. He located Sam as soon as he was off watch, digging him out of his bunkroom and taking him out into the corridor.

Sam looked at him sourly. "I thought I told you not to look me up?"

"Never mind! Sam, I'm worried about you. This 'restricted' angle … it means you won't have a chance to—

"Shut up!" It was a whisper but Max shut up. "Now look here," Sam went on, "Forget it. I got my stake and that's the important point."

"But …"

"Do you think they can seal this ship tight enough to keep me in when I decide to leave? Now stay away from me. You're teacher's pet and I want to keep it that way. I don't want you lectured about bad companions, meaning me."

"But I want to help, Sam. I …"

"Will you kindly get up above 'C' deck where you belong?"

He did not see Sam again that leg; presently, he stopped worrying about it. Hendrix required him to compute the planetary approach—child's play compared with a transition—then placed Max at the conn when they grounded. This was a titulary responsibility since it was precomputed and done on radar-automatic. Max sat with the controls under his hands, ready to override the autopilot—and Hendrix stood behind him, ready to override him—but there was no need; the *Asgard* came down by the plotted curve as easy as descending stairs. The thrust beams bit in and Max reported, "Grounded, sir, on schedule."

"Secure."

Max spoke into the ship's announcers. "Secure power room. Secure all space details. Dirtside routine, second section."

Of the four days they were there, he spent the first three nominally supervising and actually learning from Kovak in the routine ninety-day inspection and overhaul of control room instruments. Ellie was vexed with him, as she had had different plans. But on the last day, he hit dirt with her, chaperoned by

Mr. and Mrs. Mendoza.

It was a wonderful holiday. Compared with Terra, Halcyon is a bleak place and Bonaparte is not much of a city. Nevertheless, Halcyon is an earth-type planet with breathable air, and the party from the *Asgard* had not set foot outdoors since Earthport, months of time and unthinkable light-years behind. The season was postaphelion, midsummer, Nu Pegasi burned warm and bright in blue sky. Mr. Mendoza hired a carriage and they drove out into green, rolling countryside behind four snuffling little Halcyon ponies. There they visited a native pueblo, a great beehive structure of mud, conoid on conoid, and bought souvenirs—two of which turned out to have "Made in Japan" stamped inconspicuously on them.

Their driver, Herr Eisenberg, interpreted for them. The native who sold the souvenirs kept swiveling his eyes, one after another, at Mrs. Mendoza. He twittered some remarks to the driver, who guffawed. "What does he say?" she asked.

"He was complementing you."

"So? But how?"

"Well … he says you are for a slow fire and no need for seasoning; you'd cook up nicely. And he'd do it, too," the colonist added, "if you stayed here after dark."

Mrs. Mendoza gave a little scream. "You didn't tell us they were *cannibals.* Josie, take me back!"

Herr Eisenberg looked horrified. "Cannibals? Oh, no, lady! They don't eat each other, they just eat us—when they can get us, that is. But there hasn't been an incident in twenty years."

"But that's worse!"

"No, it isn't, lady. Look at it from their viewpoint. They're civilized. This old fellow would never break one of their laws. But to them we are just so much prime beef, unfortunately hard to catch."

"Take us back at once! Why, there are hundreds of them, and only five of us."

"Thousands, lady. But you are safe as long as Gneeri is shining." He gestured at Nu Pegasi. "It's bad juju to kill meat during daylight. The spirit stays around to haunt."

Despite his reassurances the party started back. Max noticed that Eldreth had been unfrightened. He himself had wondered what had kept the natives from tying them up until dark.

They dined at the Josephine, Bonaparte's best (and only) hotel. But there was a real three-piece orchestra, a dance floor, and food that was at least a welcome change from the menus of

the Bifrost Lounge. Many ship's passengers and several officers were there; it made a jolly party. Ellie made Max dance between each course. He even got up his nerve to ask Mrs. Daigler for a dance, once she came over and suggested it.

During the intermission, Eldreth steered him out on the adjacent balcony. There she looked up at him. "You leave that Daigler hussy alone, hear me?"

"Huh? I didn't do anything."

She suddenly smiled warmly. "Of course not, you big sweet ninny. But Ellie has to take care of you." She turned and leaned on the rail. Halcyon's early night had fallen, her three moons were chasing each other. The sky blazed with more stars than can be seen in Terra's lonely neighborhood. Max pointed out the strange constellations and showed her the departure direction they would take tomorrow to reach transition for Nova Terra. He had learned four new skies so far, knew them as well as he knew the one that hung over the Ozarks—and he would learn many more. He was already studying, from the charts, other skies they would be in this trip.

"Oh, Max, isn't it *lovely?*"

"Sure is. Say, there's a meteor. They're scarce here, mighty scarce."

"Make a wish! Make a wish quick!"

"Okay." He wished that he would get off easy when it came to the showdown. Then he decided that wasn't right; he ought to wish old Sam out of his jam—not that he believed in it, either way.

She turned and faced him. "What did you wish?"

"Huh?" He was suddenly self-conscious. "Oh, mustn't tell, that spoils it."

"All right. But I'll bet you get your wish," she added softly.

He thought for a moment that he could have kissed her, right then, if he had played his cards right. But the moment passed and they went inside. The feeling stayed with him on the ride back, made him elated. It was a good old world, even if there were some tough spots. Here he was, practically a junior astrogator on his first trip—and it hadn't been more than weeks since he was borrowing McAllister's mules to work the crop and going barefooted a lot to save shoes.

And yet, here he was in uniform, riding beside the best-dressed girl in four planets.

He fingered the insignia on his chest. Marrying Ellie wasn't such an impossible idea now that he was an officer—if he ever

decided to marry. Maybe her old man wouldn't consider an officer—and an astrogator at that—completely ineligible. Ellie wasn't bad; she had spunk and she played a fair game of three-dee—most girls wouldn't even be able to learn the rules.

He was still in a warm glow when they reached the ship and were hoisted in.

Kelly met him at the lock. "Mr. Jones—the Captain wants to see you."

"Huh? Oh. G'night, Ellie—I'll have to run." He hurried after Kelly. "What's up?"

"Dr. Hendrix is dead."

13
TRANSITION

Max questioned Kelly as they hurried up to the Captain's cabin.

"I don't know. I just don't know, Max." Kelly seemed close to tears. "I saw him before dinner—he came into the Hole to check what you and Kovak have been doing. He seemed all right. But the Purser found him dead in his bunk, the middle of the evening." He added worriedly, "I don't know what is going to happen now."

"What do you mean?"

"Well … if I was captain, I'd lay over and send for a relief. But I don't know."

For the first time, Max realized that this change would make Mr. Simes the astrogator. "How long would it take to get a relief?"

"Figure it out. The *Dragon* is about three months behind us; she'd pick up our mail. A year about." In the contradictions of interstellar travel the ships themselves were the fastest method of communication; a radio message (had such a silly thing been attempted) would have taken more than two centuries to reach Earth, a like time for a reply.

Max found the Captain's cabin open and crowded with officers, all standing around, saying nothing, and looking solemn; he slipped inside without announcing himself and tried to be inconspicuous. Kelly did not go in. Captain Blaine sat at his desk with head bent. Several stragglers, members of the gay party at the Josephine, arrived after Max; First Officer Walther checked them off with his eyes, then said quietly to Blaine, "Ship's officers all present, sir."

Captain Blaine raised his head and Max was shocked to see how old he looked. "Gentlemen," he said in a low voice, "you know the sad news. Dr. Hendrix was found dead in his room this evening. Heart attack. The Surgeon tells me that he passed on about two hours before he was found—and that his death was probably almost painless."

His voice broke, then he continued. "Brother Hendrix will be placed in his last orbit two hours after we raise ship tomorrow. That is how he would have wished it, the Galaxy was his home. He gave unstintingly of himself that men should ride safely

among the stars."

He paused so long that Max thought that the old man had forgotten that others were present. But when he resumed his voice was almost brisk. "That is all, gentlemen. Astrogators will please remain."

Max was not sure that he counted as an astrogator but the use of the plural decided him. First Officer Walther started to leave; Blaine called him back. When the four were alone, the Captain said, "Mr. Simes, you will take over head-of-department duties at once. Mr., uh …" his eyes rested on Max.

"Jones, sir."

"Mr. Jones will assume your routine duties, of course. This tragedy leaves you short-handed; for the rest of this trip I will stand a regular watch."

Simes spoke up. "That isn't necessary, Captain. We'll make out."

"Perhaps. But those are my wishes."

"Aye aye, sir."

"Prepare to lift on schedule. Any questions?"

"No, sir."

"Goodnight, gentlemen. Dutch, stay a moment, please?"

Outside the door Simes started to turn away; Max stopped him. "Mr. Simes?"

"Huh? Yes?"

"Any instructions for me, sir?"

Simes looked him over. "You stand your watch, Mister. I'll handle everything else."

The next morning, Max found a crepe armband on his desk and a notice from the First Officer that mourning would continue for one week. The *Asgard* raised on schedule, with the Captain sitting quietly in his chair, with Simes at the control console. Max stood near the Captain, with nothing to do. Aside from the absence of Hendrix all was routine—except that Kelly was quite bad-tempered. Simes, Max admitted, handled the maneuver smartly—but it was precomputed, anyone could have done it; shucks, Ellie could have been sitting there. Or Chipsie.

Max had the first watch. Simes left him after enjoining him not to deviate from schedule without phoning him first. An hour later, Kovak relieved Max temporarily and Max hurried to the passenger lock. There were five honorary pall bearers, the Captain, Mr. Walther, Simes, Max, and Kelly. Behind them, crowding the passageways, were officers and most of the crew. Max saw no passengers.

The inner door of the lock was opened; two steward's mates carried the body in and placed it against the outer door. Max was relieved to see that it had been wrapped in a shroud covering it completely. They closed the inner door and withdrew.

The Captain stood facing the door, with Simes and the First Officer standing guard on one side of the door and, on the other side facing them, Max and Kelly. The Captain flung one word over his shoulder: "Pressure!"

Behind stood Bennett wearing a portable phone; he relayed the word to the power room. The pressure gauge over the lock door showed one atmosphere; now it started to crawl upward. The Captain took a little book from his pocket and began to read the service for the dead. Feeling that he could not stand to listen, Max watched the pressure gauge. Steadily it climbed. Max reflected that the ship had already passed escape speed for the Nu Pegasi system before he had been relieved; the body would take an open orbit.

The gauge reached ten atmospheres; Captain Blaine closed his book. "Warn the passengers," he said to Bennett.

Shortly the loudspeakers sounded: "All hands! All passengers! The ship will be in free fall for thirty seconds. Anchor yourselves and do not change position." Max reached behind him, found one of the many hand holds always present around an airlock and pulled down so that his grip would keep his feet in contact with the deck. A warning siren howled—then suddenly he was weightless as the ship's boost and the artificial anomalous gravity field were both cut out.

He heard the Captain say loudly and firmly, "Ashes to ashes, dust to dust. Let the body be cast forth."

The pressure gauge dropped suddenly to zero and Dr. Hendrix was launched into space, there to roam the stars for all eternity.

Max felt weight again as the power room brought them back to ship-normal. The pressure gauge showed gradually building pressure. People turned away and left, their voices murmuring low. Max went up and relieved the watch.

The following morning, Simes moved into Dr. Hendrix's cabin. There was trouble with First Officer Walther about it—Max heard only third-hand reports—but the Captain upheld Simes; he stayed in the Astrogator's quarters. The Worry Hole settled into routine not much different from what had gone

before, except that Simes' personality spread through everything. There had never been a posted watch list before; Kelly had always assigned the crewmen and the Doctor had simply informed the top-watch standers orally of his wishes. Now a typed list appeared:

> first watch Randolph Simes, Astrogator
> second watch Captain Blaine
> (M. Jones, acting apprentice, under instruction)
> third watch Kelly, Ch. Cmptrmn.
> *(signed)* Randolph Simes, Astrogator

Below was a four-watch list for crewmen, also signed by Simes.

Max looked at it and shrugged it off. It was obvious that Simes had it in for him, though he could not figure out why. It was equally obvious that Simes did not intend to let him do any astrogation and that Max's chances of being accepted in time as a full-fledged brother had now, with the death of Dr. Hendrix, sunk to zero. Unless, of course, Captain Blaine overrode Simes and forced a favorable report, which was extremely unlikely. Max again began to think of going along with Sam at Nova Terra.

Well, in the meantime he'd stand his watches and try to stay out of trouble. That was that.

There was only one transition to be made between Halcyon and Nova Terra, a leap of ninety-seven light-years three weeks out from Halcyon at a boost of seventeen gravities—the boost always depended on the distance from the star to the gateway, since the purpose was to arrive there just under the speed of light. The Worry Hole stayed on a watch in three for the officers and one in four for crewmen for the first two weeks. Captain Blaine showed up each watch but seemed quite willing for Max to carry out the light duties of that portion of the leg. He gave little instruction—when he did, he was likely to wander off into anecdotes, amusing but not useful.

Max tried to continue his own drill, carrying out the routine middle o' watch computation as if it were the frantic matter it would have been near transition. Captain Blaine watched him, then said mildly, "Don't get yourself into a state, son. Always program on paper when possible—always. And take time to check. Hurrying causes mistakes." Max said nothing, thinking of Dr. Hendrix, but carried out the orders.

At the end of his first watch under the Captain, Max signed the log as usual. When Simes came on watch four hours later, Max was dug out of bed and required to report to the control room. Simes pointed to the log. "What's the idea, Mister?"

"Of what, sir?"

"Signing the log. You weren't officer of the watch."

"Well, sir, the Captain seemed to expect it. I've signed a lot of logs and he's always approved them in the past."

"Hmm—I'll speak to the Captain. Go below."

At the end of his next watch, having received no instructions, Max prepared the log and took it to the Captain. "Sir? Do you want to sign this? Or shall I?"

"Eh?" Blaine looked at it. "Oh, I suppose I had better. Always let a head of department do things his own way if possible. Remember that when you are a skipper, son." He signed it.

That settled it until the Captain started a habit of not being there, first for short periods, then for longer. The time came when he was absent at the end of the watch; Max phoned Mr. Simes. "Sir, the Captain isn't here. What do you want me to do?"

"So what? It's his privilege to leave the control room."

"But Kelly is ready to relieve and the log isn't signed. Shall I sign it? Or shall I phone him?"

"Phone him? Jumping jeepers, no! Are you crazy?"

"What are your orders, sir?"

Simes was silent, then answered, "Print his name, then sign under it 'By direction'—and after this use your head."

They changed to watch-and-watch for the last week. Max continued under the Captain; Kelly assisted Simes. Once the shift was made, Blaine became meticulous about being present in the control room and, when Max started to make the first computation, gently pushed him aside. "I had better take over, lad. We're getting closer now."

So Max assisted him—and became horrifyingly aware that the Captain was not the man he must once have been. His knowledge of theory was sound and he knew all the short cuts—but his mind tended to wander. Twice in one computation Max had to remind him diplomatically of details. Yet the Old Man seemed unaware of it, was quite cheerful.

It went on that way. Max began to pray that the Captain would let the new Astrogator make the transition himself—much as he despised Simes. He wanted to discuss his misgivings with Kelly—there was no one else with whom it would have

been possible—but Kelly was on the opposite watch with Simes. There was nothing to do but worry.

When the last day arrived, he discovered that Captain Blaine neither intended to take the ship through himself nor to let Simes do it; he had a system of his own. When they were all in the Worry Hole the Captain said, "I want to show you all a wrinkle that takes the strain out of astrogating. With no reflections on our dear brother, Dr. Hendrix, while he was a great astrogator, none better—nevertheless he worked too hard. Now here is a method taught me by my own master. Kelly, if you will have the remote controls led out, please."

He had them seat themselves in a half-circle, himself, Simes, and Max around the saddle of the computer, with Kelly in the saddle. Each of them was armed with programming forms and Captain Blaine held the remote-control switches in his lap. "Now the idea is for us each to work a sight in succession, first me, then Mr. Simes, then Mr. Jones. That way we keep the data flowing without strain. All right, lads, start pitching. Transition stations everyone."

They made a dry run, then the Captain stood up. "Call me, Mr. Simes, two hours before transition. I believe you and Mr. Jones will find that this method gives you enough rest in the meantime."

"Yes, sir. But Captain—may I make a suggestion?"

"Eh? Certainly, sir."

"This is a fine system, but I suggest that Kelly be put in the astrogating group instead of Jones. Jones is not experienced. We can put Kovak in the saddle and Lundy on the book."

Blaine shook his head. "No. Accuracy is everything, sir, so we must have our best operator at the computer. As for Mr. Jones, this is how he must get experience—if he gets rattled, you and I can always fill in for him." He started to leave, then added, Kovak can alternate with Kelly until I return. Mustn't have anyone getting tired, that way mistakes are made."

"Aye aye, sir."

Simes said nothing more to Max. They started working sights, alternately, using written programming on printed forms. The sights were coming in on a twenty-minute schedule, giving each of them forty minutes for a problem if he cared to take it. Max began to think that the Captain's method did have its points. Certainly, Dr. Hendrix had worked himself to death—ships did not wear out but men did.

He had plenty of time to work not only his own problems, but

those of Simes. The data came out orally and there was nothing to keep Max from programming Simes' sights in his head and checking on what went into the computer. So far as he could see Simes was doing all right—though of course there was no real strain involved, not yet.

They ate sandwiches and drank coffee where they sat, leaving their seats only for five minutes or so at a time. Captain Blaine showed up twenty minutes early. He smiled and said cheerily, "Everyone happy and relaxed? Now we really get down to it. I have just time for a cup of coffee."

A few minutes later, he sat down and took over the control switches from Simes. The sights were coming through on a ten-minute schedule now, still ample time. Max continued to work them all, his own on paper and the others in his head. He was always through in time to catch the data for the next sight, program it mentally and check translations as Lundy thumbed the book. It gave him a running picture of how closely they were in the groove, how much hunting they were having to do in approaching their invisible target. It seemed to him that Simes tended to over-correct and that the Captain was somewhat optimistically under-correcting, but neither was so far out as to endanger the ship.

Maybe he was wrong about the Captain—the Old Man seemed to steady down when it mattered. His own corrections, he was glad to see, the Captain applied without question.

After more than an hour with transition forty-five minutes away Captain Blaine looked up and said, "All right, boys, we're getting close. Slam them to us as fast as you can now."

Smythe and Kovak, with Noguchi and Bennett running for them, slipped into high gear; data poured out in a steady stream. Max continued to work every sight, programming his own in his head and calling off figures faster than he wrote them down. He noticed that Simes was sweating, sometimes erasing and starting over. But the figures Simes called out agreed with what Max thought they should be, from his own mental programming. Captain Blaine seemed relaxed, though he had not speeded up materially and sometimes was still using the computer when Max was ready to pour his sight into it.

At one point Simes spoke too rapidly, slurring his figures, Lundy promptly said, "Repeat, sir!"

"Confound it! Clean out your ears!" But Simes repeated. The Captain glanced up, then bent back to his own problem. As soon as the computer was free, Captain Blaine called his own figures

to Lundy. Max had already set up the Captain's sight in his mind, was subconsciously listening while watching Simes.

An alarm bell rang in his mind. "Captain! I don't check you!"

Captain Blaine stopped. "Eh?"

"That program is wrong, sir."

The Captain did not seem angry. He simply handed his programming board to Simes. "Check me, sir."

Simes glanced quickly at the figures. "I check you, sir!"

Blaine said, "Drop out, Jones. Mr. Simes and I will finish."

"But—"

"Drop out, Mister!"

Max got out of the circle, seething inside. Simes' check of the Captain's set up hadn't meant anything, unless Simes had listened to and remembered (as Max had) the data as it came in. The Captain had transposed an eight and a three in the fifth and sixth decimal places—the set up would look okay unless one knew the correct figures. If Simes had even bothered to check it, he added bitterly.

But Max could not keep from noting and processing the data in his mind. Simes' next sight should catch the Captain's error; his correction should repair it. It would be a big correction, Max knew; traveling just under the speed of light the ship clipped a million miles in less than six seconds.

Max could see Simes hesitate as the lights from his next sight popped up on the computer and Lundy translated them back. Why, the man looked frightened! The correction called for would push the ship extremely close to critical speed—Simes paused, then ordered less than half the amount that Max believed was needed.

Blaine applied it and went on with his next problem. When the answer came out, the error, multiplied by time and unthinkable velocity, was more glaring than ever. The Captain threw Simes a glance of astonishment, then promptly made a correction. Max could not tell what it was, since it was done without words by means of the switch in his lap.

Simes licked the dryness from his lips. "Captain?"

"Time for just one more sight," Blaine answered. "I'll take it myself, Mr. Simes."

The data were passed to him, he started to lay his problem out on the form. Max saw him erase, then look up; Max followed his gaze. The pre-set on the chronometer above the computer showed the seconds trickling away. "Stand by!" Blaine announced.

Max looked up. The stars were doing the crawling together that marked the last moments before transition. Captain Blaine must have pressed the second switch, the one that would kick them over, while Max was watching, for the stars suddenly blinked out and were replaced instantaneously by another starry firmament, normal in appearance.

The Captain lounged back, looked up. “Well,” he said happily, “I see we made it again.” He got up and headed for the hatch, saying over his shoulder, “Call me when you have laid us in the groove, Mr. Simes.” He disappeared down the hatch.

Max looked up again, trying to recall from the charts he had studied just what piece of this new sky they were facing. Kelly was looking up, too. “Yes, we came through,” Max heard him mutter. “But *where?”*

Simes also had been looking at the sky. Now he swung around angrily. “What do you mean?”

“What I said,” Kelly insisted. “That’s not any sky I ever saw before.”

“Nonsense, man! You just haven’t oriented yourself. Everybody knows that a piece of sky can look strange when you first glance at it. Get out the flat charts for this area; well find our landmarks quickly enough.”

“They are out, sir. Noguchi.”

It took only minutes to convince everyone else in the control room that Kelly was right, only a little longer to convince even Simes. He finally looked up from the charts with a face greenish white. “Not a word to anybody,” he said. “That’s an order—and I’ll bust any man who slips. Kelly, take the watch.”

“Aye aye, sir.”

“I’ll be in the Captain’s cabin.” He went below to tell Blaine that the *Asgard* had come out in unknown space—was lost.

14
ANYWHERE

Two hours later, Max climbed wearily up into the Worry Hole. He had just had a bad half-hour, telling the truth as he saw it. Captain Blaine had been disinclined to blame anyone but himself, but had seemed stunned and bewildered. Simes had been nasty. His unstated logic seemed to be that, since it could not possibly be his fault and since it was unthinkable to blame the Captain, it must be Max's fault. Since Max had been relieved some minutes before transition, his theory seemed to be that Max had caused it by making a disturbance as they were approaching the critical instant—joggled their elbows, so to speak.

Mr. Walther had been present, a mute judge. They spoke of matters outside his profession; he had seemed to be studying their faces. Max had stuck doggedly to his story. He found Kelly still on watch. Kovak and Smythe were taking spectrograms; Noguchi and Lundy were busy with papers. "Want to be relieved?" he said to Kelly.

Kelly looked troubled. "I'm sorry, but you can't."

"Huh?"

"Mr. Simes phoned while you were on your way up. He says you are not to stand duty until further notice."

"He did? Well, I'm not surprised."

"He also said that you were to stay out of the control room."

Max made a violent statement about Simes. He added, "Well, it was nice while it lasted. Be seeing you."

He turned away but Kelly stopped him. "Don't be in a hurry, Max. He won't be up for a while. I want to know what happened. From the computer I can't tell what goes on."

Max told him, drawing on his memory for the figures. Kelly nodded at last. "That confirms what I've been able to dig out. The Captain flubbed with a transposition—easy to do. Then Simes didn't have the guts to make a big correction when it came around to him. But one more thing you don't know. Neither do they—yet."

"Huh? What?"

"The power room recorder shows it. Guenther had the watch down there and gave it to me over the phone. No, I didn't tell

him anything was wrong. I just asked for the record; that's not unusual. By the way, any excitement down below? Passengers blowing their tops?"

"Not when I came up."

"Won't be long. They can't keep this quiet forever. Back to my story—things were already sour but the Captain had one last chance. He applied the correction and a whopping big one. But he applied it with the wrong sign, just backwards."

Profanity was too weak. All Max could say was, "Oh, my!"

"Yeah. Well, there's the devil to pay and him out to lunch."

"Any idea where we are?"

Kelly pointed to Kovak and Smythe at the spectrostellograph. "They're fishing, but no bites. Bright stars first, B-types and Os. But there is nothing that matches the catalogues so far."

Noguchi and Lundy were using a hand camera. Max asked, "What are *they* doing?"

"Photographing the records. All of 'em—programming sheets, the rough data from the chartsmen, the computer tape, everything."

"What good will that do?"

"Maybe none. But sometimes records get lost. Sometimes they even get changed. But not this time. I'm going to have a set of my own."

The unpleasant implications of Kelly's comments were sinking into Max's mind when Noguchi looked up. "That's all, Boss."

"Good." Kelly turned to Max. "Do me a favor. Stick those films in your pocket and take them with you. I want them out of here. I'll pick them up later."

"Well … all right." While Noguchi was unloading the camera Max added to Kelly, "How long do you think it will take to figure out where we are, checking spectra?"

Kelly looked more troubled than ever. "Max, what makes you think there is anything to find?"

"I don't follow you."

"Why should anything out there …" He made a sweeping gesture. " … match up with any charts we've got here?"

"You mean," Max said slowly, "that we might not be in our own galaxy at all? Maybe in another, like the Andromeda Nebula, say?"

"Maybe. But that's not all. Look, Max, I'm no theoretical physicist, that's sure, but so far as I know all that theory says is that when you pass the speed of light you have to go out of your own space, somewhere else. You've become irrelevant and it

won't hold you. But *where* you go, unless you are set just right for a Horst congruency, that's another matter. The theory doesn't say. Does it?"

Max's head started to ache. "Gee, I don't know."

"Neither do I. But since we weren't set to duck back into our own space at another point, we may be anywhere. And I mean *anywhere*. We may be in some other space-time totally unconnected with our own." He glanced up at the strange stars.

Max went below feeling worse than ever. He passed Simes going up; the Astrogator scowled at him but did not say anything. When Max reached his stateroom, he put the films in a drawer—then thought about it, removed the drawer and cached them in dead space behind the drawer.

Max stayed in his room and worried. He fretted over being kept out of the control room, wanting very badly himself to check the sky for known stars. B- and O-type stars—well, that was all right, but there were half a dozen other ways. Globular star clusters, now—they'd be easy to identify; snag four of them and you'd know where you were as clear as reading a street sign. Then it would be just a case of fining it down, because you'd know what to look for and where. After which, you'd high-tail it for the nearest charted congruency, whether it took you a week or a year. The ship couldn't *really* be lost.

But suppose they weren't even in the right galaxy?

The thought dismayed him. If that were the case, they'd never get home before the end of time. It was chased out by another thought—suppose Kelly's suspicion had been correct, that this was an entirely different universe, another system of space and time? What then? He had read enough philosophical fancies to know that there was no theoretical reason for such to be impossible; the Designer might have created an infinity of universes, perhaps all pretty much alike—or perhaps as different as cheese and Wednesday. Millions, billions of them, all side by side from a multidimensional point of view.

Another universe might have different laws, a different speed of light, different gravitational ballistics, a different time rate—why they might get back to find that ten million years had passed and Earth burnt to a cinder!

But the light over his desk burned steadily, his heart pumped as always, obeying familiar laws of hydraulics, his chair pressed up against him—if this was a different sort of space the differences weren't obvious. And if it *was* a different universe,

there was nothing to be done about it.

A knock came at the door, he let Kelly in and gave him the chair, himself sitting on the bed. “Any news?”

“No. Golly I’m tired. Got those pix?”

Max took out the drawer, fished around behind it, gave them to Kelly. “Look, Chief, I got an idea.”

“Spill it.”

“Let’s assume that we’re in the right galaxy, because—”

“Because if we ain’t, there isn’t any point in trying!”

“Well, yes. All right, we’re in the Milky Way. So we look around, make quick sample star counts and estimate the distance and direction of the center. Then we try to identify spectra of stars in that direction, after deciding what ones we ought to look for and figuring apparent magnitudes for estimated distance. That would …”

“—save a lot of time,” Kelly finished wearily. “Don’t teach your grandpop how to suck eggs. What the deuce do you think I’ve been doing?”

“Oh. Sorry.”

“Don’t be. It’s more than our revered boss thought of. While I been trying to work, he’s been bellyachin’ around, finding fault, and trying to get me to say that he was dead right in everything —worrying about himself instead of worrying about his ship. Pfui! By the way, he grabbed the records just like I thought he would—‘to show the Captain.’ *He* says.” Kelly stood up. “I’d better go.”

“Don’t rush. I’ll ring for coffee.”

“Running out of my ears now.” Kelly took the films from his pocket and looked at them dutifully. “I had Noggy make two shots of everything; this is a double set. That’s a good hidey-hole you’ve got. What say we stick one set in there and let it cool? Never can tell.”

“Kelly, you aren’t really expecting trouble over those records? Seems to me we’ve got trouble enough with the ship being lost.”

“Huh? Max, you’re going to make a good officer someday. But you’re innocent. Now I’m a suspenders *and* belt man. I like to take as few chances as possible. Doc Hendrix—rest his soul!—was the same way.” Kelly waited until Max had returned the spare set to the space back of the drawer, then started to leave. He paused.

“One thing I forgot to tell you, Max. We happened to come out pretty close to a star and a G-type at that.”

“Oh.” Max considered it. “Not one we know?”

"Of course not, or I would have said so. Haven't sized it yet, but figuring normal range in the Gs we could reach it in not less than four weeks, not more than a year, at high boost. Thought you'd like to know."

"Well, yes. Thanks. But I can't see that it makes much difference."

"No? Doesn't it seem like a good idea to have a Sol-type star, with maybe Earth-type planets around it, not far off?"

"Well …"

"It does to me. The Adam-and-Eve business is rugged at best —and we might be in for a long stay." With that he left.

No steward's mate came to tell Max it was time for dinner; when he noticed that it was past time, he went to the lounge. Most of the passengers were already seated, although some were standing around talking. It was impossible to miss the feeling of unrest in the room. Max saw that the Captain was not at his table, nor was Mr. Walther at his. As he headed for his own table, a Mr. Hornsby tried to grab his arm. Max shook him off. "Sorry, sir. I'm in a hurry."

"Wait a minute! I want to ask you …"

"Sorry." He hurried on and sat down. Chief Engineer Compagnon was not at the table, but the usual passengers were present. Max said, "Good evening," and reached for his soup spoon, just to keep busy.

There was no soup to be toyed with, nor were there rolls and butter on the table, although it was ten minutes past the hour. Such things simply did not happen in Chief Steward Dumont's jurisdiction. Come to think about it, Dumont was not in sight.

Mrs. Daigler put a hand on his arm. "Max? Tell me, dear— what is this silly rumor going around?"

Max tried to maintain a poker face. "What rumor, ma'am?"

"You must have heard it! After all, you're in astrogation. They say that the Captain turned the wrong corner or something and that we're falling into a star."

Max tried to give a convincing chuckle. "Who told you that? Whoever it was probably couldn't tell a star from his elbow."

"You wouldn't fool your Aunt Maggie?"

"I can assure you positively that the *Asgard* is not falling into a star. Not even a small star." He turned in his chair. "But it does look like something's fallen into the galley. Dinner is awfully late."

He remained turned, trying to avoid further questions. It did

not work. Mr. Arthur called out sharply, “Mr. Jones!”

He turned back. “Yes?”

“Why stall us? I have been informed authoritatively that the ship is lost.”

Max tried to look puzzled. “I don’t follow you. We seem to be in it.”

Mr. Arthur snorted. “You know what I mean! Something went wrong with that whatyoumucallit—transition. We’re lost.”

Max put on a school-teacherish manner, ticking off points on his fingers. “Mr. Arthur, I assure you that the ship is in absolutely no danger. As for being lost, I assure you just as firmly that if we are, the Captain neglected to tell me so. I was in the control room at transition and he seemed quite satisfied with it. Would you mind telling me who has been spreading this story? It’s a serious thing, starting such rumors. People have been known to panic.”

“Well … it was one of the crew. I don’t know his name.”

Max nodded. “I thought so. Now in my experience in space …” He went on, quoting from his uncle “ … I have learned that the only thing faster than light is the speed with which a story can spread through a ship. It doesn’t have to have any foundation, it spreads just the same.” He looked around again. “I wonder what has happened to dinner? I’d hate to go on watch hungry.”

Mrs. Weberbauer said nervously, “Then we are all right, Maxie?”

“We’re all right, ma’am.”

Mrs. Daigler leaned toward him again and whispered, “Then why are you sweating, Max?”

He was saved by a steward’s mate rushing up to the table and starting to deal out plates of soup. Max stopped him when he came around and said quietly, “Jim, where’s Dumont?”

Out of the corner of his mouth the waiter said, “Cooking.”

“Huh? Where’s the chef?”

The steward’s mate leaned down and whispered, “Frenchy is boiled as a judge. I guess he couldn’t take it. You know.”

Max let him go. Mr. Arthur said sharply, “What did he tell you?”

“I was trying to find out what went wrong in the galley,” Max answered. “Seems the cook incapacitated himself.” He spooned up a mouthful of the soup. “From the taste, I’d say he had burned his thumb in this so-called chowder. Pretty bad, isn’t it?”

Max was saved from further evasions by the arrival of the

First Officer. Mr. Walther went to the Captain's table and banged on a glass with a spoon. "Your attention, please!"

He waited for quiet, then took a paper from his pocket. "I have an announcement to make on behalf of the Captain. Those of you who are familiar with the theory of astrogation are aware that space is changing constantly, due to the motions of the stars, and that consequently no two trips are exactly alike. Sometimes it is necessary, for this reason, to make certain changes in a ship's routing. Such a circumstance has arisen in this present trip and the Asgard will be somewhat delayed in reaching her next destination. We regret this, but we can't change the laws of nature. We hope that you will treat it as a minor inconvenience—or even as additional vacation, in the friendly and comfortable atmosphere of our ship. Please remember, too, that the insurance policy accompanying your ticket covers you completely against loss or damage you may be cost through the ship being behind schedule."

He put away the paper; Max had the impression that he had not actually been reading from it. "That is all that the Captain had to say, but I want to add something myself. It has come to my attention that someone has been spreading silly rumors about this minor change in schedule. I am sorry if any of you have been alarmed thereby and I assure you that I will take very strict measures if the originator can be identified." He risked a dignified smile. "But you know how difficult it is to trace down a bit of gossip. In any case, I want to assure you all that the Asgard is in no danger of any sort. The old girl was plying space long before any of us were born, she'll still be going strong after we all die of old age—bless her sturdy bones!" He turned and left at once.

Max had listened in open-mouthed admiration. He came from country where the "whopper" was a respected literary art and it seemed to him that he had never heard a lie told with more grace, never seen one interwoven with truth with such skill, in his life. Piece by piece, it was impossible to say that anything the First Officer had said was untrue; taken as a whole it was a flat statement that the Asgard was not lost—a lie if he ever heard one. He turned back toward his table mates. "Will someone pass the butter, please?"

Mr. Arthur caught his eye. "And you told us," he said sharply, "that nothing was wrong!"

Mr. Daigler growled, "Lay off him, Arthur. Max did pretty well, under the circumstances."

Mrs. Weberbauer looked bewildered. “But Mr. Walther said that everything was all right?”

Daigler looked at her with compassion. “We’re in trouble, Mama Weberbauer. That’s obvious. But all we can do is keep calm and trust the ship’s officers. Bight, Max?”

“I guess that’s right, sir.”

15
“THIS ISN’T A PICNIC”

Max kept to his room that evening and the next day, wishing neither to be questioned by passengers nor to answer questions about why he had been relieved of duty. In consequence, he missed the riot, having slept through it. He first heard of it when the steward’s mate who tended his room showed up with a black eye. “Who gave you the shiner, Garcia?”

“I’m not sure, sir. It happened in the ruckus last night.”

“Ruckus? What ruckus?”

“You mean you don’t know?”

“This is the first I’ve heard of it. What happened?”

Garcia Lopez stared at the overhead. “Well—I wouldn’t want to say too much. You know how it is— nobody wants to testify against a mate. No?”

“Who asked you to peach on a mate? You don’t have to mention names—but what happened?”

“Well sir. Some of those chicos, they ain’t got much sense.” Slowly Max learned that the unrest among the crew had been greater than that among the passengers, possibly because they understand more clearly the predicament. Some of them had consulted with Giordano’s poor-man’s vodka, then had decided to call on the Captain in a body and demand straight talk. The violence had taken place when the master-at-arms had attempted to turn them back at the companionway to “C” deck.

“Anybody hurt?”

“Not what you’d call hurt. Cut up a little. I picked this up …” He touched his eye tenderly. “ … from being too anxious to see what was going on. Slats Kovak busted an ankle.”

“Kovak! Why would *he* be in it?” It did not make sense that a member of the Worry gang should take part in anything so unreasonable.

“He was coming down, coming off watch, I guess. Maybe he was backing up the constable. Or maybe he just got caught in the swinging doors. Your friend Sam Anderson was sure in the thick of it.”

Sam! Max felt sick at heart—Sam in trouble *again!* “You’re sure?”

“I was there.”

"Uh, he wasn't leading it, was he?"

"Oh, you got me wrong, M—Mr. Jones. He settled it. I never see a man who could use his hands like that. He'd grab two of 'em … *clop!* their heads would come together. Then he would grab two more."

Max decided to come out of hiding and do two things: look up Kovak, find out how he was and what he might need or want; and second, look up Sam. But before he could leave, Smythe arrived with a watch list to initial. He found that he was assigned watch-and-watch with Simes—and that he himself was due on watch immediately. He went up, wondering what had caused Simes to relent.

Kelly was in the control room; Max looked around, did not see Simes. "You got it, Chief?"

"Until you relieve me. This is my last watch."

"How's that? Are you his pet peeve now?"

"You could say so. But not the way you think, Max. He drew up a watch list with him and me heel-and-toe. I politely pointed out the guild rules, that I wasn't being paid to take the responsibility of top watch."

"Oh, brother! What did he say?"

"What could he say? He could order me in writing and I could accept in writing, with my objection to the orders entered in the log—and his neck is out a yard. Which left him his choice of putting you back on the list, asking the Captain to split it with him, or turning his cap around and relieving himself for the next few weeks. With Kovak laid up it didn't leave him much choice. You heard about Kovak?"

"Yes. Say, what was that?" Max glanced over where Noguchi was loafing at the computer and lowered his voice. "Mutiny?"

Kelly's eyes grew round. "Why, as I understand it, sir, Kovak slipped and fell down a companionway."

"Oh. Like that, huh?"

"That's what it says in the log."

"Hmm … well, I guess I had better relieve you. What's the dope?"

They were in orbit under power for the nearby G-type star; the orders were entered in the Captain's order book … in Simes' handwriting but with Captain Blaine's signature underneath. To Max it looked shaky, as if the Old Man had signed it under emotional stress. Kelly had already placed them in the groove. "Have we given up trying to find out where we are?" Max asked.

"Oh, no. Orders are to spend as much time as routine permits on it. But I'll lay you seven to two you don't find anything. Max, this is somewhere else entirely."

"Don't give up. How do you know?"

"I feel it."

Nevertheless, Max spent the watch "fishing." But with no luck. Spectrograms, properly taken and measured, are to stars what fingerprints are to men; they can be classified and comparisons made with those on file which are most nearly similar. While he found many which matched fairly closely with catalogued spectra, there was always the difference that makes one identical twin not quite like his brother.

Fifteen minutes before the end of the watch, he stopped and made sure that he was ready to be relieved. While waiting he thought about the shenanigan Kelly had pulled to get him back on duty. Good old Kelly! He knew Kelly well enough to know that he must not thank him; to do so would be to attribute to the Chief Computerman a motive which was "improper"—just wink the other eye and remember it.

Simes stomped in five minutes past the hour. He said nothing but looked over the log and records of observations Max had made. Max waited several minutes while growing more and more annoyed. At last he said, "Are you ready to relieve me, sir?"

"All in good time. I want to see first what you've loused up this time." Max kept his mouth shut. Simes pointed at the log where Max had signed it followed by 'C.O.o/W.' "That's wrong, to start with. Add 'under instruction.'"

Max breathed deeply. "Whose instruction, sir?"

"Mine."

Max hesitated only momentarily before answering, "No, sir. Not unless you are present during my watch to supervise me."

"Are you defying me?"

"No, sir. But I'll take written orders on that point … entered in the log."

Simes closed the log book and looked him slowly up and down. "Mister, if we weren't short-handed you wouldn't be on watch. You aren't ready for a top watch—and it's my opinion that you won't ever be."

"If that's the way you feel, sir, I'd just as lief go back to chartsman. Or steward's mate."

"That's where you belong!" Simes' voice was almost a scream. Noguchi had hung around after Lundy had relieved him; they

both looked up, then turned their heads away.

Max made no effort to keep his answer private. “Very good, sir. Will you relieve me? I’ll go tell the First Officer that I am surrendering my temporary appointment and reverting to my permanent billet.”

Max expected a blast. But Simes made a visible effort to control himself and said almost quietly, “See here, Jones, you don’t have the right attitude.”

Max thought to himself, “What have I got to lose?” Aloud he said, “You’re the one who doesn’t have the right attitude, sir.”

“Eh? What’s that?”

“You’ve been riding me ever since I came to work in the Hole. You’ve never bothered to give me any instruction and you’ve found fault with everything I did. Since my probationary appointment, it’s been four times worse. You came to my room and told me that you were opposed to my appointment, that you didn’t want me …”

“You can’t prove that!”

“I don’t have to. Now you tell me that I’m not fit to stand the watch you’ve just required me to stand. You’ve made it plain that you will never recommend me for permanent appointment, so obviously I’m wasting my time. I’ll go back to the Purser’s gang and do what I can there. Now, will you relieve me, sir?”

“You’re insubordinate.”

“No, sir, I am not. I have spoken respectfully, stating facts. I have requested that I be relieved—my watch was over a good half hour ago—in order that I may see the First Officer and revert to my permanent billet. As allowed by the rules of both guilds,” Max added.

“I won’t let you.”

“It’s my option, sir. You have no choice.”

Simes’ face showed that he indeed had no choice. He remained silent for some time, then said more quietly, “Forget it. You’re relieved. Be back up here at eight o’clock.”

“Not so fast, sir. You have stated publicly that I am not competent to take the watch. Therefore, I can’t accept the responsibility.”

“Confound it! What are you trying to do? Blackmail me?”

Max agreed in his mind that such was about it, but he answered, “I wouldn’t say so, sir. You can’t have it both ways.”

“Well—I suppose you are competent to stand this sort of watch. There isn’t anything to do, actually.”

“Very good, sir. Will you kindly log the fact?”

"Huh?"

"In view of the circumstances, sir, I insist on the letter of the rules and ask you to log it."

Simes swore under his breath, then grabbed the stylus and wrote quickly. He swung the log book around. "There!"

Max read: "M. Jones is considered qualified to stand a top watch in space, not involving anomaly, (s) R. Simes, Astrogator."

Max noted the reservation, the exception that would allow Simes to keep him from ever reaching permanent status. But Simes had stayed within the law. Besides, he admitted to himself, he didn't want to leave the Worry gang. He comforted himself with the thought that since they were all lost together it might never matter what Simes recommended.

"Quite satisfactory, sir."

Simes grabbed the book. "Now get out. See that you're back here on time."

"Aye aye, sir." Max could not refrain from having the last word, standing up to Simes had gone to his head. "Which reminds me, sir: will you please relieve me on time after this?"

"What?"'

"Under the law a man can't be worked more than four hours out of eight, except for a logged emergency."

"Go below!"

Max went below, feeling both exultant and sick. He had no taste for fights, never had; they left him with a twisted lump inside. He burst into his room, and almost fell over Sam.

"Sam!"

"The same. What's eating you, boy? You look like the goblins had been chasing you."

Max flopped on his bunk and sighed. "I feel that way, too." He told Sam about the row with Simes.

Sam nodded approval. "That's the way to deal with a jerk like that—insult him until he apologizes. Give him lumps enough times and he'll eat out of your hand."

Max shook his head dolefully. "Today was fun, but he'll find some way to take it out on me. Oh, well!"

"Not so, my lad. Keep your nose clean and wait for the breaks. If a man is stupid and bad-tempered—which he is, I sized him up long ago—if you are smart and keep *your* temper, eventually he leaves himself wide open. That's a law of nature."

"Maybe." Max swung around and sat up. "Sam—you're wearing your shield again."

Sam stuck his thumb under the badge of office of Chief Master-at-Arms. “Didn’t you notice?”

“I guess I was spinning too fast. Tell me about it—did the First decide to forgive and forget?”

“Not precisely. You know about that little excitement last night?”

“Well, yes. But I understand that officially nothing happened?”

“Correct. Mr. Walther knows when to pull his punches.”

“What did happen? I heard you cracked some skulls together.”

“Nothing much. And not very hard. I’ve seen ships where it would have been regarded as healthy exercise to settle your dinner. Some of the lads got scared and that made them lap up happy water. Then a couple with big mouths and no forehead got the inspiration that it was their right to talk to the Captain about it. Being sheep, they had to go in a flock. If they had run into an officer, he could have sent them back to bed with no trouble. But my unfortunate predecessor happened to run into them and told them to disperse. Which they didn’t. He’s not the diplomatic type, I’m afraid. So he hollered, ‘Hey, Rube!’ in his quaint idiom and the fun began.”

“But where do you figure? You came to help him?”

“Hardly. I was standing at a safe distance, enjoying the festivities, when I noticed Mr. Walther’s bedroom slippers coming down the ladder. Whereupon I waded in and was prominent in the ending. The way to win a medal, Max, is to make sure the general is watching, then act.”

Max grinned. “Somehow I hadn’t figured you for the hero type.”

“Heaven forbid! But it worked out. Mr. Walther sent for me, ate me out, told me that I was a scoundrel and a thief and a nogoodnick—then offered me my shield back if I could keep order below decks. I looked him in the eye, a sincere type look, and told him I would do my best. So here I am.”

“I’m mighty pleased, Sam.”

“Thanks. Then he looked me in the eye and told me that he had reason to suspect—as if he didn’t know!— that there might be a still somewhere in the ship. He ordered me to find it, and then destroy any liquor I found.”

“So? How did Mr. Gee take that?”

“Why, Fats and I disassembled his still and took the pieces back to stores, then we locked up his stock in trade. I pleaded

with him not to touch it until the ship was out of its mess. I explained that I would break both his arms if he did."

Max chuckled. "Well, I'm glad you're back in good graces. And it was nice of you to come tell me about it." He yawned. "Sorry. I'm dead for sleep."

"I'll vamoose. But I didn't come to tell you, I came to ask a question."

"Huh? What?"

"Have you seen the Skipper lately?"

Max thought back. "Not since transition. Why?"

"Nor has anyone else. I thought he might be spending his time in the Worry Hole."

"No. Come to think, he hasn't been at his table either—at least when I've been in the lounge."

"He's been eating in his cabin." Sam stood up. "Very, very interesting. Mmm … I wouldn't talk about it, Max."

Simes was monosyllabic when Max relieved him. Thereafter, they had no more words; Simes acted as if Max did not exist except for the brief formalities in relieving. The Captain did not show up in the control room. Several times Max was on the point of asking Kelly about it, but each time decided not to. But there were rumors around the ship—the Captain was sick, the Captain was in a coma, Walther and the Surgeon had relieved him of duty, the Captain was constantly at his desk, working out a new and remarkable way to get the ship back to where it belonged.

By now it was accepted that the ship was lost, but the time for hysteria had passed; passengers and crew were calm and there seemed to be general consent that the decision to put down around the solar-type star toward which they were headed was the only reasonable decision. They were close enough now that it had been determined that the star did have planets—no G-class star had ever been found to be without planets, but to pick them up on a stereoplate was consoling.

It came to a choice between planet #3 and planet #4. Bolometric readings showed the star to have a surface temperature slightly over 6000° Kelvin, consistent with its spectrum; it was not much larger than Father Sol; calculated surface temperatures for the third and fourth planets gave a probability that the third might be uncomfortably hot whereas number four might be frigid. Both had atmospheres.

A fast hyperboloid swing past both settled the matter. The

bolometer showed number three to be too hot and even number four to be tropical. Number four had a moon which the third did not—another advantage for four, for it permitted, by examining the satellite's period, an easy calculation of its mass; from that and its visible diameter its surface gravity was a matter of substitution in classic Newtonian formula … ninety-three percent of Earth-normal, comfortable and rather low in view of its over ten-thousand-mile diameter. Absorption spectra showed oxygen and several inert gases.

Simes, assisted by Kelly, placed the *Asgard in* a pole-to-pole orbit to permit easy examination—Max, as usual, was left to chew his nails.

The Captain did not come to the control room even to watch this maneuver.

They hung in parking orbit while their possible future home was examined from the control room and stared at endlessly from the lounge. It was in the lounge that Ellie tracked Max down. He had hardly seen her during the approach, being too busy and too tired with a continuous heel-and-toe watch and in the second place with much on his mind that he did not want to have wormed out of him. But, once the orbit was established and power was off, under standard doctrine Simes could permit the watch to be taken by crewmen—which he did and again told Max to stay out of the control room.

Max could not resist the fascination of staring at the strange planet; he crowded into the lounge along with the rest. He was standing back and gazing over heads when he felt his arm grabbed. "Where have you been?"

"Working." He reached out and caressed Chipsie; the spider puppy leaped to his shoulders and started searching him.

"Hmmmph! You don't work all the time. Do you know that I sent *nine* notes to your room this past week?"

Max knew. He had saved them but had not answered. "Sorry."

"Sorry he says. Never mind—Max, tell me all about it." She turned and looked out. "What have they named it? Is there anybody on it? Where are we going to land? *When* are we going to land? Max, aren't you *excited?"*

"Whew! They haven't named it yet—we just call it 'the planet' or 'number four.' Kelly wants to name it 'Hendrix.' Simes is hedging; I think he wants to name it after himself. The Captain hasn't made any decision that I know of."

"They ought to name it 'Truth' or 'Hope' or something like that. Where is the Captain, Max? I haven't seen the old dear for

days."

"He's working. This is a busy time for him, of course." Max reflected that his evasion might be true. "About your other questions, we haven't seen any signs of cities or towns or anything that looks like civilization."

"What do you mean by 'civilization'? Not a lot of dirty old cities surely?"

Max scratched his head and grinned. "You've got me. But I don't see how you could have it, whatever it is, without cities."

"Why not? Bees have cities, ants have cities, challawabs have cities. None of them is civilized. I can think of a lovely civilization that would just sit around in trees and sing and think beautiful thoughts."

"Is that what you want?"

"No, it would bore me to death. But I can think about it, can't I? You didn't say when we were going to land?"

"I don't know. When they decide it's safe."

"I wish they would hurry. Isn't it thrilling? Just like Robinson Crusoe, or Swiss Family Robinson—I can't keep those two straight. Or the first men on Venus."

"They died."

"So they did. But we won't, not on—" She waved her hand at the lovely green and blue and cloudy-white globe, "—not on, uh, I'm going to call it 'Charity' because that's what it looks like."

Max said soberly, "Ellie, don't you realize this is serious?" He kept his voice low in order not to alarm others. "This isn't a picnic. If this place doesn't work out, it might be pretty awful."

"Why?"

"Look, don't quote me and don't talk about it. But I don't think any of us will ever get home again."

She sobered momentarily, then shrugged and smiled. "You can't frighten me. Sure, I'd like to go home—but if I can't, well, Charity is going to be good to us. I know it."

Max shut up.

16
"—OVER A HUNDRED YEARS—"

The *Asgard* landed on Charity the following day. Eldreth affixed her choice by the statistical process of referring to the planet by that name, assuming that it was official, and repeating it frequently.

When word was passed that landing would commence at noon, ship's time, Max went to the control room and simply assumed that it was his right to be present. Simes looked at him sourly but said nothing—for an evident reason: Captain Blaine was present.

Max was shocked at his appearance. The Captain seemed to have aged ten to fifteen years since the bad transition. In place of his habitual cheerful expression was one that Max had trouble tagging—until he recalled that he had seen it on horses, on horses too old to work but still working—head bent, eyes dull, mute and resigned against a fate both inescapable and unbearable. The old man's skin hung loose, as if he had not eaten for days or weeks. He seemed hardly interested in what was going on around him.

He spoke only once during the maneuver. Just before the chronometer showed noon. Simes straightened up from the console and looked at his skipper. Blaine lifted his head and said in a hoarse whisper, "Take her down, Mister."

An Imperial military ship in landing on a strange spot would normally guide a radar-beacon robot down first, then home in on the beacon. But the *Asgard* was a merchant liner; she expected to land nowhere but at ports equipped with beams and beacons and other aids. Consequently, the landing was made blind by precomputed radar-automatic and was planned for an open valley selected by photograph. The planet was densely wooded in most areas, choice was limited.

Simes presented a picture of the alert pilot, hands poised at the controls, eyes on the radar screen portraying the view below them, while racked in front of him were comparison photographs, radar and visual. The let-down was without incident; starry black sky gave way to deep purple, then to blue. There was not even a jar as the ship touched, for its private

gravity inside its Horstian field kept them from feeling impressed acceleration. Max knew they were down when he saw Simes cut in the thrust beams to cradle the ship upright.

Simes said to the microphone, “Power room, start auxiliaries and secure. All hands, dirtside routine, first section.” He turned to Blaine. “Grounded, Captain.”

Blaine’s lips shaped the words, “Very good, sir.” He got up and shuffled toward the hatch. When he had gone Simes ordered, “Lundy, take stand-by watch. The rest of you clear the control room.”

Max went down with Kelly. When they reached “A” deck Max said grudgingly, “It was a smart landing I’ll have to admit.”

“Thanks,” said Kelly.

Max glanced at him. “So you calculated it?”

“I didn’t say that. I just said, ‘Thanks.’”

“So? Well, you’re welcome.” Max felt his weight pulse and suddenly he was a trifle lighter. “They cut the field. Now we’re really down.”

He was about to invite Kelly into his room for the inevitable coffee when the ship’s speakers sounded: “All hands! All passengers! Report to Bifrost Lounge for an important announcement. Those on watch are ordered to listen in by phone.”

“What’s up?” asked Max.

“Why wonder? We’ll go see.”

The lounge was crowded with passengers and crew. First Officer Walther stood near the Captain’s table, counting the crowd with his eyes. Max saw him speak to Bennett, who nodded and hurried away. The large view port was across the lounge from Max; he stretched on his toes and tried to see out. All he could see was hilltops and blue sky.

There was a lessening of the murmur of voices; Max looked around to see Bennett preceding Captain Blaine through the crowd. The Captain went to his table and sat down; the First Officer glanced at him, then cleared his throat loudly. “Quiet, please.”

He went on, “I’ve called you together because Captain Blaine has something he wants to say to you.” He stopped and stepped back respectfully.

Captain Blaine slowly stood up, looked uncertainly around. Max saw him square his thin shoulders and lift his head. “Men,” he said, his voice suddenly firm and strong. “My guests and friends—” he went on, his voice sinking. There was a hush in

the lounge, Max could hear the Captain's labored breathing. He again asserted control of himself and continued, "I have brought you … I have brought you as far as I can … ." His voice trailed off. He looked at them for a long moment, his mouth trembling. It seemed impossible for him to continue. The crowd started to stir.

But he did continue and they immediately quieted. "I have something else to say," he began, then paused. This pause was longer, when he broke it his voice was a whisper. "I'm sorry. God keep you all." He turned and started for the door.

Bennett slipped quickly in front of him. Max could hear him saying quietly and firmly: "Gangway, please. Way for the Captain." No one said anything until he was gone, but a woman passenger at Max's elbow was sobbing softly.

Mr. Walther's sharp, clear voice rang out. "Don't go away, anyone! I have additional announcements to make." His manner ignored what they had all just seen. "The time has come to sum up our present situation. As you can see, this planet is much like our Mother Earth. Tests must be made to be sure that the atmosphere is breathable, and so forth; the Surgeon and the Chief Engineer are making them now. But it seems likely that this new planet will prove to be eminently suitable for human beings, probably even more friendly than Earth.

"So far, we have seen no indications of civilized life. On the whole, that seems a good thing. Now as to our resources—the *Asgard* carries a variety of domestic animals, they will be useful and should be conserved as breeding stock. We have an even wider variety of useful plants, both in the ship's hydroponic gardens and carried as seeds. We have a limited but adequate supply of tools. Most important of all, the ship's library contains a fair cross-section of our culture. Equally important, we ourselves have our skills and traditions …"

"Mr. Walther!"

"Yes, Mr. Hornsby?"

"Are you trying to tell us that you are dumping us here?"

Walther looked at him coldly. "No. Nobody is being 'dumped' as you put it. You can stay in the ship and you will be treated as a guest as long as the *Asgard*—or you yourself—is alive. Or until the ship reaches the destination on your ticket. If it does. No, I have been trying to discuss reasonably an open secret; this ship is lost."

A voiceless sigh went through the room. All of them knew it, but up 'til now it had not been admitted officially. The flat

announcement from a responsible officer echoed like the sentence of a court.

"Let me state the legal position," Mr. Walther went on. "While this ship was in space, you passengers were subject to the authority of the Captain, as defined by law, and through him you were subject to me and the other ship's officers. Now we have landed. You may go freely … or you may stay. Legally, this *is* an unscheduled stopover; if the ship ever leaves here you may return to it and continue as passengers. That is my responsibility to you and it will be carried out. But I tell you plainly that, at present, I have no hope to offer that we will ever leave here—which is why I spoke of colonizing. We are lost."

In the rear of the room, a woman began to scream hysterically, with incoherent sounds of, " … home! I want to go home! Take me …"

Walther's voice cut through the hubbub. "Dumont! Flannigan! Remove her. Take her to the Surgeon."

He continued as if nothing had happened. "The ship and the ship's crew will give every assistance possible, consistent with my legal responsibility to keep the ship in commission, to aid any of you who wish to colonize. Personally I think …"

A surly voice cut in, "Why talk about law'? There is no law here!"

Walther did not even raise his voice. "But there is. As long as this ship is in commission, there is law, no matter how many light-years she may be from her home port. Furthermore, while I have no authority over any who choose to leave the ship, I strongly advise you to make it your first act dirtside to hold a town meeting, elect officers, and found a constitutional government. I doubt that you can survive otherwise."

"Mr. Walther."

"Yes, Mr. Daigler?"

"This is obviously no time for recriminations …"

"Obviously!"

Daigler grinned wryly. "So I won't indulge, though I could think of some. But it happens that I know something professionally about the economics of colonizing."

"Good! We'll use your knowledge."

"Will you let me finish? A prime principle in maintaining a colony out of touch with its supply base is to make it large enough. It's a statistical matter, too small a colony can be overwhelmed by a minor setback. It's like going into a dice game with too little money: three bad rolls and you're sunk.

Looking around me, it's evident that we have much less than optimal minimum. In fact—"

"It's what we have, Mr. Daigler."

"I see that. I'm not a wishful thinker. What I want to know is, can we count on the crew as well?"

Mr. Walther shook his head. "This ship will not be decommissioned as long as there are men capable of manning it. There is always hope, no matter how small, that we may find a way home. It is even possible that an Imperial survey ship might discover us. I'm sorry—no."

"That isn't quite what I asked. I was two jumps ahead of you, I figured you wouldn't let the crew colonize. But can we count on their help? We seem to have about six females, give or take one, who will probably help to carry on the race. That means that the next generation of our new nation is going to be much smaller. Such a colony would flicker and die, by statistical probability—*unless* every man jack of us works ten hours a day for the rest of his life, just to give our children a better chance of making it. That's all right with me, if we all make an all-out try. But it will take all the manpower we have to make sure that some young people who aren't even born yet get by thirty years from now. Will the crew help?"

Mr. Walther said quietly, "I think you can count on it."

"Good enough."

A small, red-faced man whose name Max had never learned interrupted. "Good enough, my eye! I'm going to sue the company, I'm going to sue the ship's officers individually. I'm going to shout it from the …" Max saw Sam slipping through the crowd to the man's side, the disturbance stopped abruptly.

"Take him to the Surgeon," Mr. Walther said wearily. "He can sue us tomorrow. The meeting is adjourned."

Max started for his room. Eldreth caught up with him. "Max! I want to talk with you."

"All right." He started back toward the lounge.

"No, I want to talk privately. Let's go to your room."

"Huh? Mrs. Dumont would blow her top, then she'd tell Mr. Walther."

"Bother with all that! Those silly rules are dead. Didn't you listen at the meeting?"

"You're the one who didn't listen."

He took her firmly by the arm, turned her toward the public room. They ran into Mr. and Mrs. Daigler coming the other way. Daigler said, "Max? Are you busy?"

"Yes," answered Eldreth.

"No," said Max.

"Hmm … you two had better take a vote. I'd like to ask Max some questions. I've no objection to your being with us, Eldreth, if you will forgive the intrusion."

She shrugged. "Oh, well, maybe you can handle him. I can't."

They went to the Daiglers' stateroom, larger and more luxurious than Max's and possessing two chairs. The two women perched on the bed, the men took the chairs. Daigler began, "Max, you impress me as a man who prefers to give a straight answer. There are things I want to know that I didn't care to ask out there. Maybe you can tell me."

"I will if I can."

"Good. I've tried to ask Mr. Simes, all I get is a snottily polite brush off. I haven't been able to get in to see the Captain—after today I see that there wouldn't have been any point anyhow. Now, can you tell me, with the mathematics left out, what chance we have to get home? Is it one in three, or one in a thousand—or what?"

"Uh, I couldn't answer it that way."

"Answer it your own way."

"Well, put it this way. While we don't know where we are, we know positively where we aren't. We aren't within, oh, say a hundred light-years of any explored part of the Galaxy."

"How do you know? It seems to me that's a pretty big space to be explored in the weeks since we got off the track."

"It sure is. It's a globe twelve hundred trillion miles thick. But we didn't have to explore it, not exactly."

"Then how?"

"Well, sir, we examined the spectra of all first magnitude stars in sight—and a lot more. None of them is in our catalogues. Some are giants that would be first magnitude anywhere within a hundred light-years of them—they'd be certain to be in the catalogues if a survey ship had ever been that close to them. So we are absolutely certain that we are a long, long way from anywhere that men have ever been before. Matter of fact, I spoke too conservatively. Make it a globe twice as thick, eight times as big, and you'd still be way over on the conservative side. We're *really* lost."

"Mmm … I'm glad I didn't ask those questions in the lounge. Is there any possibility that we will ever know where we are?"

"Oh, sure! There are thousands of stars left to examine. Chief Kelly is probably shooting one this minute."

"Well, then, what are the chances that we will eventually find ourselves ?"

"Oh, I'd say they were excellent—in a year or two at the outside. If not from single stars, then from globular star clusters. You realize that the Galaxy is a hundred thousand light-years across, more or less, and we can see only stars that are fairly close. But the globular clusters make good landmarks, too." Max added the mental reservation, *if we aren't in the wrong galaxy*. There seemed no point in burdening them with that dismaying possibility.

Daigler relaxed and took out a cigar. "This is the last of my own brand, but I'll risk smoking it now. Well, Maggie, I guess you won't have to learn how to make soap out of wood ashes and hog drippings after all. Whether it's one year or five, we can sweat it out and go home."

"I'm glad." She patted her ornate coiffure with soft, beautifully manicured hands. "I'm hardly the type for it."

"But you don't understand!"

"Eh? What's that, Max?"

"I didn't say we could get back. I just said I thought it was fairly certain we would find out where we are."

"What's the difference? We find out, then we go home."

"No, because we *can't* be less than a hundred light-years from explored space."

"I don't see the hitch. This ship can do a hundred light-years in a split second. What was the longest leap we made this cruise? Nearly five hundred light-years, wasn't it?"

"Yes, but—" Max turned to Eldreth. "You understand? Don't you?"

"Well, maybe. That folded-scarf thing you showed me?"

"Yes, yes. Mr. Daigler, sure the *Asgard* can transit five hundred light-years in no time—or any other distance. But *only* at calculated and surveyed congruencies. We don't know of any within a hundred light-years, at least … and we won't know of any even if we find out where we are because we know where we *aren't*. Follow me? That means that the ship would have to travel at top speed for something over a hundred years and maybe much longer, just for the first leg of the trip."

Mr. Daigler stared thoughtfully at his cigar ash, then took out a pen knife and cut off the burning end. "I'll save the rest. Well, Maggie, better study up on that homemade soap deal. Thanks, Max. My father was a farmer, I can learn."

Max said impulsively, "I'll help you, sir."

“Oh yes, you did tell us that you used to be a farmer, didn’t you? You should make out all right.” His eyes swung to Eldreth. “You know what I would do, if I were you kids? I’d get the Captain to marry you right away. Then you’d be all set to tackle colonial life right.”

Max blushed to his collar and did not look at Ellie. “I’m afraid I can’t. I’m a crew member, I’m not eligible to colonize.”

Mr. Daigler looked at him curiously. “Such devotion to duty. Well, no doubt Ellie can take her pick among the single men passengers.”

Eldreth smoothed her skirt demurely. “No doubt.”

“Come, Maggie. Coming, Eldreth?”

17
CHARITY

"Charityville" was a going concern within a week. It had a mayor, Mr. Daigler; a main street, Hendrix Avenue; even its first wedding, performed by the mayor in the presence of the villagers—Mr. Arthur and little Becky Weberbauer. The first cottage, now building, was reserved for the newlyweds. It was a log cabin and a very sloppy job, for, while there were those among them who had seen pictures or had even seen log cabins, there was no one who had ever built one before.

There was an air of hope, of common courage, even of gaiety in the new community. The place was fragrant with new starts, forward-looking thoughts. They still slept in the ship and breakfasted there, then carried their lunches and labored mightily, men and women alike, through the short day—Charity spun on her axis in twenty-one-plus hours. They returned at nightfall, dined in the ship, and some found energy to dance a bit before going to bed.

Charity seemed to be all that her name implied. The days were balmy, the nights were mild—and beautiful beyond anything yet found in the Galaxy. Its star (they simply called it "the Sun") was accompanied by more comets than had yet been seen around any star. A giant with a wide tail stretched from zenith to western horizon, diving at their Sun. Another, not yet so grand but awesome enough to have caused watchers for the end of the world on Earthly hilltops, approached from the north, and two more decorated the southern sky with lace of icy fire.

Concomitant with comets was, necessarily, an equal abundance of meteors. Every night was a shower of falling stars, every day ended like Solar Union Day with a display of fireworks.

They had seen no dangerous animals. Some of the settlers reported seeing centaurlike creatures about the size of Shetland ponies, but they seemed timid and had scurried away when discovered. The prevalent life form appeared to be marsupial mammak in various sizes and shapes. There were no birds, but there was another sort of flying life not found elsewhere—jellyfishlike creatures four or five feet high with dangling tendrils, animated balloons. They appeared to have muscular

control over their swollen bladders for they could rise and fall, and could even, by some not evident means, go upwind against a gentle breeze—in higher winds they anchored to treetops, or floated free and let the wind carry them.

They seemed curious about Charityville and would hang over a work site, turning slowly around as if to see everything. But they never got within reach. Some of the settlers wanted to shoot one down and examine it; Mayor Daigler forbade it.

There was another animal too—or might be. They were called "peekers" because all that anyone had seen was something that ducked quickly behind a rock or tree when anyone tried to look. Between the possibly mythical peeker and the ubiquitous balloons, the colonists felt that their new neighbors took a deep but not unfriendly interest in what they were doing.

Maggie Daigler—she was "Maggie" to everyone now—had put away her jewels, drawn dungarees from ship's stores, and chopped off her hair. Her nails were short and usually black with grime. But she looked years younger and quite happy.

In fact, everyone seemed happy but Max.

Ellie was avoiding him. He cursed himself and his big mouth thrice daily and four times at night. Sure, Daigler had spoken out of turn—but was that any reason for him to open his mouth and put his foot in it? Of course, he had never figured on marrying Ellie—but shucks, maybe they were stuck here forever. "Prob ably," not "maybe," he corrected. The ban on joining the colony would he let up in time—in which case, what was the sense in getting in bad with the only eligible girl around?

An astrogator ought to be a bachelor but a farmer needed a wife. Mighty nice to have someone cooking the turnip greens and jointing a chicken while a man was out in the fields. He ought to know—Maw had let it slide often enough. Ellie wouldn't be like Maw. She was strong and practical and with just a little teaching would do all right.

Besides she was about the prettiest thing he ever saw, if you looked at her right.

When Mr. and Mrs. Dumont, by special dispensation, joined the colony, it caused him to act. Since the steward and stewardess would have no duties in a ship without passengers, no one could reasonably object—but it gave Max an approach. He went to see the First Officer.

"Probationary Apprentice Jones, sir."

Walther glanced up. "I think I'd say 'Assistant Astrogator

Jones' if I were you. Closer to the facts. Come in."

"Uh, that's what I wanted to speak with you about, sir."

"So? How?"

"I want to revert to my billet."

"Eh? Why would you rather be a chartsman than an astrogator? And what difference does it make—now?"

"No, sir. I'm electing to resume my permanent appointment, steward's mate third."

Walther looked amazed. "There must be more to this. Explain yourself."

With much stammering, Max explained his trouble with Simes. He tried to be fair and finished with the dismal feeling that he had sounded childish. Walther said, "You're sure about this? Mr. Simes has said nothing to me about you."

"He wouldn't, sir. But it's true. You can ask Kelly."

Walther thought for a while. "Mr. Jones, I wouldn't attach too much importance to this. At your age, these conflicts of personality often seem more serious than they are. My advice is to forget it and do your work. I'll speak to Mr. Simes about his keeping you out of the control room. That isn't proper and I am surprised to hear it."

"No, sir."

" 'No, sir' what?"

"I want to return to steward's mate."

"Eh? I don't understand you."

"Because, sir, I want to join the colony. Like Chief Steward Dumont."

"Oh … A light begins to dawn." Walther slapped the desk emphatically. "Absolutely no! Under no circumstances."

"Sir?"

"Please understand me. This is not discrimination. If you were a steward's mate and nothing else, I would consider your request—under the special circumstances which I believe pertain. But you are an astrogator. You know our situation. Dr. Hendrix is dead. Captain Blaine—well, you have seen him. He may recover, I cannot plan on it. Mr. Jones, as long as there is any faint hope that this ship will ever lift again, as long as we have crew to work her, no astrogator, no chartsman, no computerman will be relieved from duty for any reason whatsoever. You see that, don't you?"

"I guess so, sir. Uh, aye aye, sir."

"Good. By the way, keep this to yourself, but as soon as the colony can get along without us temporarily, I want the ship

placed in a parking orbit so that you specialists can maintain a search. You can't work very well through this atmosphere, can you?"

"No, sir. Our instruments were designed for open space."

"So we must see that you get it." The First Officer sat silent, then added, "Mr. Jones—Max, isn't it? May I speak to you man to man?"

"Uh? Certainly, sir."

"Mmm … Max, this is none of my business, but treat it as fatherly advice. If you have an opportunity to marry—and want to—you don't have to join the colony to do it. If we stay, it won't matter in the long run whether you are crew or a charter member of the village. If we leave, your wife goes with you."

Max's ears burned. He could think of nothing to say.

"Hypothetical question, of course. But that's the proper solution." Walther stood up. "Why don't you take the day off? Go take a walk or something. Fresh air will do you good. I'll speak to Mr. Simes."

Instead, Max went looking for Sam, did not find him in the ship, discovered that he had gone dirtside. He followed him down and walked the half mile to Charityville.

Before he reached the building that was being worked on, he saw a figure separate itself from the gang. He soon saw that it was Eldreth. She stopped in front of him, a sturdy little figure in dirty dungarees. She planted her feet and set fists on her hips.

"Uh, howdy, Ellie."

"Up to your old tricks! Avoiding me. Explain yourself."

The injustice of it left him stuttering. "But … Now see here, Ellie, it's not that way at all. You've been …"

"A likely story. You sound like Chipsie caught with her hand in a candy dish. I just wanted to tell you, you reluctant Don Juan, that you have nothing to worry about. I'm not marrying anyone this season. So you can resume the uneven tenor of your ways."

"But, Ellie …" he started desperately.

"Want me to put it in writing? Put up a bond?" She looked fiercely at him, then began to laugh, wrinkling her nose. "Oh, Max, you large lout, you arouse the eternal maternal in me. When you are upset your face gets as long as a mule's. Look, forget it."

"But, Ellie … Well, all right."

"Pals?"

"Pals."

She sighed. “I feel better. I don’t know why, but I don’t like to be on the outs with you. Where were you going?”

“Uh, nowhere. Taking a walk.”

“Fine. I’ll go too. Half a sec while I gather in Chipsie.” She turned and called, “Mister Chips! Chipsie!”

“I don’t see her.”

“I’ll get her.” She ran off, to return quickly with the spider puppy on her shoulder and a package in her hand. “I picked up my lunch. We can split it.”

“Oh, we won’t be gone that long. Hi, Chipsie baby.”

“Hi, Max. Candy?”

He dug into a pocket, found a sugar cube that he had saved several days ago for the purpose; the spider puppy accepted it gravely and said, “Thank you.”

“Yes, we will,” Ellie disagreed, “because some of the men saw a herd of those centaur ponies the other side of that ridge. It’s quite a hike.”

“I don’t think we ought to go that far,” he said doubtfully. “Won’t they miss you?”

“I’ve been doing my share. See my callouses?” She stuck out a grimy paw. “I told Mr. Hornsby that I was suddenly come down with never-get-overs and he would have to find somebody else to hold while he hammered.”

He was pleased to give in. They went up rising ground and into an arroyo and soon were in a grove of primitive conifers. Mr. Chips jumped down from Ellie’s shoulders and scurried up a tree. Max stopped. “Hadn’t we better catch her?”

“You worry too much. Chipsie wouldn’t run away. She’d be scared to death. Chipsie! Here, honey!”

The spider puppy hustled through branches, got directly above them, dropped a cone on Max. Then she laughed, a high giggle. “See? She just wants to play.”

The ridge was high and Max found that his hillbilly’s wind had been lost somewhere among the stars. The arroyo meandered slowly upwards. He was still woodsman enough to keep a sharp eye out for landmarks and directions. At weary last they topped the crest. Ellie paused. “I guess they’re gone,” she said disappointedly, staring out over flatter country below them. “No! Look over there. See them! About two dozen little black dots.”

“Uh huh. Yeah.”

“Let’s go closer. I want a good look.”

“I wonder if that’s smart? We’re a far piece from the ship and

I'm not armed."

"Oh, they're harmless."

"I was thinking of what else might be in these woods."

"But we're already in the woods, and all we've seen are the hobgoblins." She referred to the balloonlike creatures, two of which had trailed them up the arroyo. The humans had grown so used to their presence that they no longer paid them any attention.

"Ellie, it's time we went back."

"No."

"Yes. I'm responsible for you. You've seen your centaurs."

"Max Jones, I'm a free citizen. You may be starting back; I'm going to have a close look at those underslung cow ponies." She started down.

"Well—Wait a moment. I want to get my bearings." He took a full look around, fixed the scene forever in his mind, and followed her. He was not anxious to thwart her anyhow; he had been mulling over the notion that this was a good time to explain why he had said what he had said to Mr. Daigler—and perhaps lead around to the general subject of the future. He wouldn't go so far as to talk about marriage—though he might bring it up in the abstract if he could figure out an approach.

How did you approach such a subject? You didn't just say, "There go the hobgoblins, let's you and me get married!"

Ellie paused. "There go the hobgloblins. Looks as if they were heading right for the herd."

Max frowned. "Could be. Maybe they talk to them?"

She laughed. "Those things?" She looked him over carefully. "Maxie, I've just figured out why I bother with you."

Huh? Maybe she was going to lead up to it for him. "Why?"

"Because you remind me of Putzie. You get the same puzzled look he does."

"Putzie?" Who is Putzie?"

"Putzie is the man my father shipped me off to Earth to get me away from—and the reason I crashed out of three schools to get back to Hespera. Only Daddy will probably have shipped him off, too. Daddy is tricky. Come here, Chipsie. Don't go so far."

She continued, "You'll love Putzie. He's nice. Stop it, Chipsie."

Max despised the man already. "I don't like to fret you," he said, "but it's a long way to Hespera."

"I know. Let's not borrow trouble." She looked him over again. "I might keep you in reserve, if you weren't so jumpy."

Before he could think of the right answer she had started down.

The centaurs—it seemed the best name, though the underparts were not much like horses and the parts that stuck up were only vaguely humanoid—clustered near the foot of the hill, not far out from the trees. They weren't grazing, it was hard to tell what they were doing. The two hobgoblins were over the group, hovering as if in interest just as they did with humans. Ellie insisted on going to the edge of the clearing to see them better.

They reminded Max of clowns made up to look like horses. They had silly, simple expressions and apparently no room for a brain case. They appeared to be marsupials, with pouches almost like bibs. Either they were all females or with this species the male had a pouch too. Several little centaurs were cavorting around, in and out the legs of their elders.

One of the babies spied them, came trotting toward them, sniffling and bleating. Behind it the largest adult pulled out of the herd to watch the young one. The colt scampered up and stopped about twenty feet away.

"Oh, the darling!" Ellie said and ran out a few feet, dropped to one knee. "Come here, pet. Come to mama."

Max started for her. "Ellie! Come back here!"

The large centaur reached into its pouch, hauled out something, swung it around its head like a gaucho's throwing rope. "Ellie!"

He reached her just as it let go. The thing struck them, wound around and held them. Ellie screamed and Max struggled to tear it loose—but they were held like Laocoön.

Another line came flying through the air, clung to them. And another.

Mr. Chips had followed Ellie. Now she skittered away, crying. She stopped at the edge of the clearing and shrilled, "Max! Ellie! Come *back. Please* back!"

18
CIVILIZATION

Ellie did not faint nor grow hysterical. After that involuntary scream, her next remark was simply, “Max, I’m sorry. My fault.”

The words were almost in his ear, so tightly were they tied together by the clinging ropes. He answered, “I’ll get us loose!” and continued to strain at their bonds.

“Don’t struggle,” she said quietly. “It just makes them tighter. We’ll have to talk our way out of this.”

What she said was true; the harder he strained the tighter the pythonlike bonds held them. “Don’t,” Ellie pleaded. “You’re making it worse. It’s hurting me.” Max desisted.

The largest centaur ambled up and looked them over. Its broad simple face was still more ludicrous close up and its large brown eyes held a look of gentle astonishment. The colt approached from the other side and sniffed curiously, bleated in a high voice. The adult bugled like an elk; the colt shied sideways, then rejoined the herd on a dead run.

“Take it easy,” Ellie whispered. “I think they were scared that we would hurt the baby. Maybe they’ll just look us over and let us go.”

“Maybe. But I wish I could get at my knife.”

“I’m glad you can’t. This calls for diplomacy.”

The rest of the herd came up, milled around and looked them over, while exchanging calls that combined bugling, whinnying, and something between a cough and a snort. Max listened. “That’s language,” he decided.

“Of course. And how I wish I had studied it at Miss Mimsey’s.”

The largest centaur leaned over them, smoothed at their bonds; they became looser but still held them.

Max said sharply, “I think they are going to untie us. Get ready to run.”

“Yes, boss.”

Another centaur reached into its built-in pouch, took out another of the ropelike things. It dropped to its fore knees, flipped the end so that it curled around Max’s left ankle. The end seemed to weld into a loop, hobbling Max as effectively as a bowline knot; Ellie was treated the same way. The biggest

centaur then patted their bonds, which fell off and writhed gently on the ground. It picked them up and stuffed them into its pouch.

The centaur that had hobbled them wrapped the ends of their tethers around its upright trunk, they merged into a belt. After an exchange of sour bugle calls with the leader, it patted the leashes which then stretched like taffy, becoming quite twenty feet long and much more slender. Max pressed his knife on Ellie and said, “Try to cut yourself loose. If you can, then run for it. I’ll keep them busy.”

“No, Max.”

“Yes! Dawggone it, quit being a brat! You’ve made enough trouble.”

“Yes, Max.” She took the knife and tried to saw through the strange rope near her ankle. The centaurs made no attempt to stop her, but watched with the same air of gentle astonishment. It was as if they had never seen a knife, had no notion of what one was. Presently she gave up. “No good, Max. It’s like trying to slice duraplastic.”

“Why, I keep that knife like a razor. Let me try.”

He had no better luck. He was forced to stop by the herd moving out—walk or be dragged. He managed to close the knife while hopping on one foot to save his balance. The group proceeded at a slow walk for a few steps, then the leader bugled and the centaurs broke into a trot, exactly like ancient cavalry.

Ellie stumbled at once and was dragged. Max sat down, managed to grab his hobble and hang on while shouting, “Hey! Stop!”

Their captor stopped and looked around almost apologetically. Max said, “Look, stupid. We can’t keep up. We’re not horses,” while helping Ellie to her feet “Are you hurt, kid?”

“I guess not.” She blinked back tears. “If I could lay hands on that hay-burning oaf, he’d be hurt— plenty!”

“You skinned your hand.”

“It won’t kill me. Just tell him to slow down, will you?”

Seeing them on their feet the monster immediately started to trot again. Down they went again, with Max trying to drag them to a halt. This time the leader trotted back from the main herd and consulted their custodian. Max took part, making up in vehemence what he lacked in semantic efficiency.

Perhaps he was effective; their keeper slowed to a fast walk, letting the others go ahead. Another centaur dropped back and became a rear guard. One of the animated balloons, which had

continued to hover over the herd, now drifted back and remained over Max and Ellie.

The pace was just bearable, between a fast walk and a dogtrot. The route led across the open, flat floor of the valley and through knee-high grass. The grass saved them somewhat, as the centaur leading them seemed to feel that a fall or two every few hundred yards represented optimum efficiency. He never seemed impatient and would stop and let them get up, but always started off again at a clip brisk for humans. Max and Ellie ceased trying to talk, their throats being burned dry by their panting efforts to keep up. A tiny stream meandered through the bottom of the valley; the centaur jumped easily across it. It was necessary for the humans to wade. Ellie paused in midstream, leaned down and started to drink. Max objected, "Ellie! Don't drink that—you don't know that it's safe."

"I hope it poisons me so I can lie down and die. Max, I can't go much farther."

"Chin up, kid. We'll get out of this. I've been keeping track of where we've gone." He hesitated, then drank also, being terribly thirsty. The centaur let them, then tugged them on.

It was as far again to the rising ground and forest on the other side. They had thought that they were as tired as they could be before they started up hill; they were mistaken. The centaur was agile as a goat and seemed surprised that they found it difficult. Finally, Ellie collapsed and would not get up; the centaur came back and stirred her roughly with a three-toed hoof.

Max struck him with both fists. The centaur made no move to retaliate but looked at him with that same stupid astonishment. Their rear guard came up and conversed with it, after which they waited for perhaps ten minutes. Max sat down beside Ellie and said anxiously, "Feeling any better?"

"Don't talk."

Presently, the guard edged between them and drove Max back by stepping on him, whereupon the other centaur tugged on Ellie's leash. It contracted and she was forced to scramble to her feet. The centaurs let them rest twice after that. After an endless time, when the local sun was dropping low in the west, they came out on flat table and, still heavily wooded. They continued through trees for a distance which Max's count of paces told him was under a mile but seemed like ten, then stopped.

They were in a semi-clearing, a space carpeted with fallen needles. Their guard came up to the other centaur and took from him the end of Max's leash, flipped it around the base of a

tree, to which it clung. The other centaur did the same with Ellie's leash to another tree about forty feet away. Having done so, they roughly urged the two together, while stopping to stroke their bonds until they were stretched out very thin. It allowed Max and Ellie enough slack that they might have passed each other.

This did not seem to please the centaurs. One of them shifted Max's leash farther back into the surrounding bushes, dragging him with it. This time at the extreme limit allowed by their bonds they were about six feet apart. "What are they doing?" asked Ellie.

"Looks like they don't want us to combine forces."

Finished, the centaurs trotted away. Ellie looked after them, began to sob, then cried openly, tears running down her dirty face and leaving tracks. "Stow it," Max said harshly. "Sniffling will get us nowhere."

"I can't help it," she bawled. "I've been brave all day—at least I've tried to be. I …" She collapsed face down and let herself go.

By getting down prone and stretching Max could just reach her head. He patted her tangled hair. "Take it easy, kid," he said softly. "Cry it out, if you'll feel better."

"Oh, Maxie! Tied up … like a dog."

"We'll see about that." He sat up and examined his tether.

Whatever the ropelike leash was, it was not rope. It had a smooth shiny surface which reminded him more of a snake, though the part that wound around his ankle showed no features; it simply flowed around his ankle and merged back into itself.

He lifted the bight and detected a faint throbbing. He stroked it as he had seen the centaurs do and it responded with flowing pulsations, but it neither shrank nor grew longer, nor did it loosen its grip. "Ellie," he announced, "this thing is *alive."*

She lifted a woebegone face. "What thing?"

"This rope."

"Oh, that! Of course."

"At least," he went on, "if it isn't, it's not really dead." He tried his knife again, there was no effect. "I'll bet if I had a match I could make it cry 'Uncle.' Got an Everlite, Ellie?"

"I don't smoke."

"Neither do I. Well, maybe I can make a fire some other way. Rubbing two sticks together, or something."

"Do you know how?"

"No." He continued stroking and patting the living rope, but,

though he always got a response in pulsations, he did not seem to have the right touch; the bond stayed as before. He was continuing this fruitless attempt when he heard his name called. "Max! Ellie!"

Ellie sat up with a jerk. "Chipsie! Oh, Max, she followed us. Come here, darling!"

The spider puppy was high above them in a tree. She looked carefully around, then scurried down, making the last ten feet a flying leap into Ellie's arms. They cuddled and made soft noises, then Ellie straightened up, her eyes shining. "Max, I feel so much better."

"So do I." He added, "Though I don't know why."

The spider puppy announced gravely, "Chipsie follow."

Max reached across and petted her. "Yes, Chipsie did. Good girl!"

Ellie hugged the spider puppy. "I don't feel deserted now, Max. Maybe everything will come out all right."

"Look, Ellie, we're not in too bad a spot. Maybe I'll find the combination to tickle these ropes or snakes or whatever so they'll give up. If I do, we'll sneak back tonight."

"How would we find our way?"

"Don't worry. I watched every foot of the way, every change of direction, every landmark."

"Even in the dark?"

"Easier in the dark. I know these stars—I sure ought to. But suppose we don't get loose; we still aren't licked."

"Huh? I don't relish spending my life tied to a tree."

"You won't. Look—I think these things are just curious about us. They won't eat us, that's sure—they probably live on grass. Maybe they'll get bored and turn us loose. But if they don't, it'll be rough on them."

"Huh? Why?"

"Because of Mr. Walther and George Daigler—and Sam, Sam Anderson; that's why. They're probably beating the bushes for us right now. We are less than ten miles from the ship—five by a straight line. They'll find us. Then if these silly-looking centaurs want to get tough, they'll learn about modern weapons. They and their fool throwing ropes!"

"It might take a long time to find us. Nobody knows where we went."

"Yes," he admitted. "If I had a pocket radio. Or some way to signal. Or even a way to build a fire. But I don't."

"I never thought. It just seemed like going for a stroll in the

park."

Max thought darkly that he had tried to warn her. Why, even the hills around home weren't safe if a body didn't keep his eyes peeled … you could run into a mean old bobcat, or even a bear. Person like Ellie never 'ud had enough hard knocks to knock sense into her, that was her trouble.

Presently, he admitted that he himself hadn't looked for grief from anything as apparently chuckled-headed and harmless as these centaur things. Anyhow, as Sam would say, no use cryin' over spilt milk when the horse was already stolen.

"Ellie."

"Huh?"

"Do you suppose Chipsie could find her way back?"

"Why, I don't know."

"If she could, we could send a message."

Chipsie looked up. "Back?" she inquired. "Please back. Go home."

Ellie frowned. "I'm afraid Chipsie doesn't talk that well. She'd probably just hiccup and get incoherent."

"I don't mean that. I know Chipsie is no mental giant. I …"

"Chipsie is smart!"

"Sure. But I want to send a written message and a map." He fumbled in a pocket, pulled out a stylus. "Do you have any paper?"

"I'll see." She found a folded paper in a dungaree pocket. "Oh, dear! I was supposed to take this to Mr. Giordano. Mr. Hornsby will be so vexed with me."

"What is it?"

"A requisition for number-ten wire."

"It doesn't matter now." He took the paper, scratched out the memorandum, turned it over and began to draw, stopping to consult the pictures filed in his mind for distances, which way the local sun lay, contours, and other details.

"Max?"

"Quiet, can't you?" He continued to sketch, then added: "URGENT—to First Officer Walther: Eldreth Cobum and self captured by centaurs. Be careful and watch out for their throwing ropes. Respectfully, M. Jones." He handed it to Ellie. "That ought to do it. Is there any way to fasten it to her? I sure don't want her to drop it."

"Mmm … let me see. Turn your back, Max."

"Why?"

"Don't be difficult. Turn your back." He did so, shortly she

said, “All right now.” He faced her and she handed him a ribbon. “How’s this?”

“Swell!” They managed to tie the ribbon, with the note folded and firmly attached, around Mr. Chips’ waist, anchoring it to a middle limb … not too easy as the spider puppy seemed to think it was a game and was ticklish as well.

“There! Stop squirming, Chipsie, and listen. Ellie wants you to go home.”

“Home.”

“Yes, home. Go back to the ship.”

“Ellie go home?”

“Ellie can’t go home.”

“No.”

“Honey, you’ve *got* to.”

“No.”

“Look, Chipsie. You find Maggie and tell her Ellie said to give you some candy. You give Maggie this.” She tugged at the tied note.

“Candy?”

“Go home. Find Maggie. Maggie will give you candy.”

“Ellie go home.”

“Please, Chipsie.”

“Ellie,” Max said urgently, “something is coming.”

Eldreth looked up, saw a centaur coming through the trees. She pointed. “Look, Chipsie! They’re coming! They’ll catch Chipsie! Go home! Run!”

The spider puppy squealed in terror and scurried for the trees. Once on a branch she looked back and whimpered. “Go home!” screamed Ellie. “Find Maggie!”

Mr. Chips shot a glance at the centaur, then disappeared. They had no time to worry further, the centaur was almost up to them. He glanced at them and went on by; it was what followed the centaur that grabbed their attention. Ellie suppressed a shriek. ! They’ve caught everybody.”

“No,” he corrected grimly. “Look again.” The gathering gloom had caused him to make the same mistake; it seemed that the entire ship’s company trotted after the centaur in single file, ankle leashed to ankle by living ropes. But only the first glance gave such an impression. These creatures were more than humanoid—but such degraded creatures had never sailed between the stars.

They shuffled quickly along like well-trained animals. One or two looked at Ellie and Max in passing, but their stares were

bovine, incurious. Small children not on leash trotted with their mothers, and once Max was startled to see a wrinkled little head peeping out of a pouch—these man-creatures were marsupials, too.

Max controlled a desire to retch and as they passed out of sight he turned to Ellie. "Gosh!"

"Max," Eldreth said hoarsely, "do you suppose we've died and gone to our punishment?"

"Huh? Don't be silly. Things are bad enough."

"I mean it. That was something right out of Dante's Inferno."

Max was swallowing uneasily and not feeling good-tempered. "Look, you can pretend you're dead if you want to. Me, I'm alive and I mean to stay so. Those things weren't men. Don't let it throw you."

"But they *were* men. Men and women and children."

"No, they weren't. Being shaped like us doesn't make them men. Being a man is something else entirely." He scowled. "Maybe the centaurs are 'men.'"

"Oh, no—"

"Don't be too sure. They seem to run things in this country."

The discussion was cut short by another arrival. It was almost dark and they did not see the centaur until he entered their clearing. He was followed by three of the—Max decided to call them 'men' though he resented the necessity—followed by three men. They were not on leashes. All three were bearing burdens. The centaur spoke to them; they distributed what they carried.

One of them set down a large clay bowl filled with water in the space separating Max and Ellie. It was the first artifact that any human had seen on Charity and did not indicate a high level of mechanical culture, being crudely modeled and clearly not thrown on a potter's wheel; it held water, no more could be said for it. A second porter dumped a double armful of small fruits beside the bowl. Two of them splashed into the bowl, he did not bother to fish them out.

Max had to look twice to see what the third slave was carrying. It looked as if he had three large ovoid balls slung by ropes in each of his hands; second inspection showed them to be animals about the size of opossums which he carried by their tails. He went around the clearing, stopping every few feet and lifting one of his burdens to a lower branch. When he had finished they were surrounded by six small creatures, each hanging by its tail. The centaur followed the slave, Max saw him stroke each animal and press a spot on its neck. In each case the

entire body of the little animal lit up, began to shine like a firefly with soft silvery light.

The clearing was softly illuminated thereby—well enough, Max thought, to read large print. One of the hobgoblins balloons came sailing silently between trees and anchored to a point thirty feet above them; it seemed to settle down for the night.

The centaur came over to Max and prodded him with a hoof, snorting inquiringly. Max listened carefully, then repeated the sound. The centaur answered and again Max mimicked. This useless exchange continued for a few phrases, then the centaur gave up and left, his train trotting after him.

Ellie shivered. "Phew!" she exclaimed. "I'm glad they're gone. I can stand the centaurs, a little, but those men … ugh!"

He shared her disgust; they looked less human close up, having hair lines that started where their eyebrows should have been. They were so flat-headed that their ears stuck up above their skulls. But it was not this that had impressed Max. When the centaur had spoken to him Max had gotten his first good look into a centaur's mouth. Those teeth were never meant for munching grain, they were more like the teeth of a tiger—or a shark.

He decided not to mention this. "Say, wasn't that the same one that was leading the herd that caught us?"

"How would I know? They all look alike."

"But they don't, any more than two horses look alike."

"Horses all look alike."

"But …" He stopped, baffled by a city viewpoint at which communication failed. "I think it was the same one."

"I can't see that it matters."

"It might. I'm trying to learn their language."

"I heard you swallowing your tonsils. How did you do that?"

"Oh, you just remember what a sound sounds like, then do it." He threw his head back and made a very plaintive sound.

"What was *that?"*

"A shote stuck in a fence. Little shote by the name of Abner I had once."

"It sounds tragic."

"It was, until I helped him loose. Ellie, I think they've bedded us down for the night." He gestured at the bowl and the fruit beside it. "Like feeding the hogs."

"Don't put it that way. Room service. Room service and maid service and lights. Food and drink." She picked up one of the fruits. It was about the size and shape of a cucumber. "Do you

suppose this is fit to eat?"

"I don't think you ought to try it. Ellie, it would be smart not to eat or drink anything until we are rescued."

"Well, maybe we could go hungry but we certainly can't go without water. You die of thirst in a day or two."

"But we may be rescued before morning."

"Maybe." She peeled the fruit. "It smells good. Something like a banana."

He peeled one and sniffed it. "More like a pawpaw."

"Well?"

"Mmm—Look here, I'll eat one. If it hasn't made me sick in a half hour, then you can try one."

"Yes, sir, boss man." She bit into the one she held. "Mind the seeds."

"Ellie, you're a juvenile delinquent."

She wrinkled her nose and smiled. "You say the sweetest things! I try to be."

Max bit into his. Not bad—not as much flavor as a pawpaw, but not bad. Some minutes later he was saying, "Maybe we should leave some for breakfast?"

"All right. I'm full anyway." Ellie leaned over and drank. Without words they had each concluded that the cloying meal required them to risk the water. "There, I feel better. At least we'll die comfortably. Max? Do you think we dare sleep? I'm dead."

"I think they are through with us for the night. You sleep, I'll sit up."

"No, that's not fair. Honest, what good would it do to keep watch? We can't get away."

"Well … here, take my knife. You can sleep with it in your hand."

"All right." She reached across the bowl and accepted it. "Good night, Max. I'm going to count sheep."

"Good night." He stretched out, shifted and got a tree cone out of his ribs, then tried to relax. Fatigue and a full stomach helped, the knowledge of their plight hindered—and that hobgoblin hanging up there. Maybe *it* was keeping watch—but not for their benefit.

"Max? Are you asleep?"

"No, Ellie."

"Hold my hand? I'm *scared."*

"I can't reach it."

"Yes, you can. Swing around the other way."

He did so, and found that he could reach over his head past the water bowl and clasp her hand. “Thanks, Max. Good night some more.”

He lay on his back and stared up through the trees. Despite the half fight given by the luminiferous animals, he could see stars and the numerous meteor trails crisscrossing the sky. To avoid thinking, he started counting them. Presently, they started exploding in his head and he was asleep.

The light of the local sun through the trees awakened him. He raised his head. “I wondered how long you would sleep,” Eldreth announced. “Look who’s here.”

He sat up, wincing with every move, and turned around. Mr. Chips was sitting on Ellie’s middle and peeling one of the papaya-like fruits. “ ’Lo, Maxie.”

“Hello, Chipsie.” He saw that the note was still tied to her. “Bad girl!”

Mr. Chips turned to Ellie for comfort. Tears started to leak out. “No, no,” corrected Ellie. “Good girl. She’s promised to go find Maggie as soon as she finishes breakfast. Haven’t you, dear?”

“Go find Maggie,” the spider puppy agreed.

“Don’t blame her, Max. Spider puppies aren’t nocturnal back home. She just waited until we were quiet, then came back. She couldn’t help it. I found her sleeping in my arm.”

The spider puppy finished eating, then drank daintily from the bowl. Max decided that it didn’t matter, considering who had probably used it before they had. This thought he suppressed quickly. “Find Maggie,” Mr. Chips announced.

“Yes, dear. Go straight back to the ship as fast as you can and find Maggie. Hurry.”

“Find Maggie. Hurry fast. ’Bye, Maxie.” The spider puppy took to the trees and scampered away in the right direction.

“Do you think she’ll get there?” asked Max.

“I think so. After all, her ancestors found their way through forests and such for a lot of generations. She knows it’s important; we had a long talk.”

“Do you really think she understands that much?”

“She understands about pleasing me and that’s enough. Max, do you suppose they can possibly reach us today? I don’t want to spend another night here.”

“Neither do I. If Chipsie can move faster than we can …”

“Oh, she can.”

“Then maybe—if they start quickly.”

“I hope so. Ready for breakfast?”

“Did Chipsie leave anything?”

“Three apiece. I’ve had mine. Here.”

“Sure you’re lying? There were only five when we went to sleep.” She looked sheepish and allowed him to split the odd one. While they were eating he noticed a change. “Hey, what became of the over-sized lightning bugs?”

“Oh. One of those awful creatures came at dawn and carried them away. I was set to scream but he didn’t come close to me, so I let you sleep.”

“Thanks. I see our chaperone is with us.” The hobgoblin still hung in the tree tops.

“Yes, and there have been peekers around all morning, too.”

“Did you get a look at one?”

“Of course not.” She stood up, stretched and winced. “Now to see what beautiful surprises this lovely day brings forth.” She made a sour face. “The program I would pick is to sit right here and never lay eyes on anything until George Daigler shows up with about a dozen armed men. I’d kiss him. I’d kiss all of them.”

“So would I.”

Until well past noon Eldreth’s chosen schedule prevailed, nothing happened. They heard from time to time the bugling and snorting of centaurs but saw none. They talked in desultory fashion, having already disposed of both hopes and fears, and were dozing in the sunshine, when they suddenly came alert to the fact that a centaur was entering the clearing.

Max felt sure that it was the leader of the herd, or at least that it was the one who had fed and watered them. The creature wasted no time, making it clear with kicks and prods that they were to allow themselves to be leashed for travel.

Never once were they free of the living ropes. Max thought of attacking the centaur, perhaps leaping on his back and cutting his throat. But it seemed most unlikely that he could do it quietly enough; one snort might bring the herd down on them. Besides which he knew no way to get free of their bonds even if he killed the centaur. Better wait—especially with a messenger gone for help.

They were led, falling and being dragged occasionally, along the route taken by the party of slaves. It became apparent that they were entering a large centaur settlement. The path opened out into a winding, well-tended road with centaurs going both

directions and branching off onto side roads. There were no buildings, none of the outward marks of a civilized race—but there was an air of organization, of custom, of stability. Little centaurs scampered about, got in the way, and were ordered aside. There was activity of various sorts on both sides of the road and grotesque human slaves were almost as numerous as centaurs, carrying burdens, working in unexplained fashions—some with living-rope bonds, some allowed to run free. They could not see much because of the uncomfortable pace they were forced to maintain.

Once Max noted an activity on his side of the road that he wished to see better. He did not mention it to Ellie, not only because talking was difficult but because he did not wish to worry her—but it had looked like an outdoor butcher shop to him. The hanging carcasses were not centaurs.

They stopped at last in a very large clearing, well filled with centaurs. Their master patted the lines that bound them and thereby caused them to shorten until they were fetched close to his sides. He then took his place in a centaur queue.

A large, grizzled, and presumably elderly centaur was holding court on one side of the "square." He stood with quiet dignity as single centaurs or groups came in succession before him. Max watched with interest so great that he almost lost his fear. Each case would be the cause of much discussion, then the centaur chieftain would make a single remark and the case would be over. The contestants would leave quietly. The conclusion was inescapable that law or custom was being administered, with the large centaur as arbiter.

There was none of the travesties of men in the clearing, but there were underfoot odd animals that looked like flattened-out hogs. Their legs were so short that they seemed more like tractor treads. They were mostly mouth and teeth and snuffling snouts, and whatever they came to, if it was not a centaur's hoof, they devoured. Max understood from watching them how the area, although thickly inhabited, was kept so clean; these scavengers were animated street cleaners.

Their master gradually worked up toward the head of the line. The last case before theirs concerned the only centaur they had seen which did not seem in vibrant health. He was old and skinny, his coat was dull and his bones stuck pitifully through his hide. One eye was blind, a blank white; the other was inflamed and weeping a thick ichor.

The judge, mayor, or top herd leader discussed his case with

two younger healthy centaurs who seemed to be attending him almost as nurses. Then the boss centaur moved from his position of honor and walked around the sick one, inspecting him from all sides. Then he spoke to him.

The old sick one responded feebly, a single snorted word. The chief centaur spoke again, got what seemed to Max the same answer. The chief backed into his former position, set up a curious whinnying cry.

From all sides the squatty scavengers converged on the spot. They formed a ring around the sick one and his attendants, dozens of them, snuffling and grunting. The chief bugled once; one attendant reached into its pouch and hauled forth a creature curled into a knot, the centaur stroked it and it unwound. To Max it looked unpleasantly like an eel.

The attendant extended it toward the sick centaur. It made no move to stop him, but waited, watching with his one good eye. The head of the slender thing was suddenly touched to the neck of the sick centaur; he jerked in the characteristic convulsion of electric shock and collapsed.

The chief centaur snorted once—and the scavengers waddled forward with surprising speed, swarming over the body and concealing it. When they backed away, still snuffling, there were not even bones.

Max called out softly, “Steady, Ellie! Get a grip on yourself, kid.”

She answered faintly, “I’m all right.”

19
A FRIEND IN NEED

For the first time they were turned loose. Their master tickled their bonds, which dropped from their ankles. Max said softly to Ellie, “If you want to run for it, I’ll keep them busy.”

Ellie shook her head. “No good. They’d have me before I went fifty feet. Besides—I can’t find my way back.”

Max shut up, knowing that she was right but having felt obliged to offer. The chief centaur inspected them with the characteristic expression of gentle surprise, exchanged bugling comments with their captor. They were under discussion for some time, there appeared to be some matter to be decided. Max got out his knife. He had no plan, other than a determination that no centaur would approach either one of them with that electric-shock creature, or any other menace, without a fight.

The crisis faded away. Their captor flicked their leashes about their ankles and dragged them off. Fifteen minutes later, they were again staked out in the clearing they had occupied. Ellie looked around her after the centaur had gone and sighed. “Be it ever so humble … Max, it actually feels good to get back here.”

“I know.”

The monotony that followed was varied by one thing only: fading hope and mounting despair. They were not treated unkindly; they were simply domestic animals—fed and watered and largely ignored. Once a day they were given water and plenty of the native papayas. After the first night, they no longer had the luxury of “artificial” light, nor did the hobgoblin hang over their clearing. But there was no way of escape, short of gnawing off a leg and crawling away.

For two or three days, they discussed the possibility of rescue with mounting anxiety, then, having beaten the subject to death they dropped it; it simply added to their distress. Ellie rarely smiled now and she had quit her frivolous back talk; it seemed that it had finally gotten through her armor that this could happen to Eldreth Coburn, only daughter of the rich and almost all-powerful Mr. Commissioner Coburn—a chattel, a barnyard animal of monsters themselves suitable only for zoos.

Max took it a little more philosophically. Never having had

much, he did not expect much—not that he enjoyed it. He kept his worst fear secret. Ellie referred to their status as “animals in a zoo” because most of their visitors were small centaurs who came sniffling and bleating around with a curiosity that their elders seemed to lack. He let her description stand because he believed their status worse than that—he thought that they were being fattened for the table.

One week after their capture, Eldreth declined to eat breakfast and stayed silent all morning. All that Max could think of to say evoked only monosyllables. In desperation he said, “I’ll beat you at three-dee and spot you two starships.”

That roused her. “You and who else?” she said scornfully. “And with what?”

“Well, we could play it in our heads. You know-blindfold.”

She shook her head. “No good. You’d claim your memory was better than mine and I wouldn’t be able to prove you were cheating.”

“Nasty little brat.”

She smiled suddenly. “That’s better. You’ve been too gentle with me lately—it depresses me. Max, we could make a set.”

“How?”

“With these.” She picked up one of many tree cones that littered the clearing. “A big one is a flagship. We can pick various sizes and break the thingamajigs off and such.”

They both got interested. The water bowl was moved aside so that it no longer occupied the center of the space marked by the limits of their tethers and the no-man’s-land between them was brushed free of needles and marked with scratches as boards. The boards had to be side by side; they must stack them in their minds, but that was a common expedient for players with good visualization when using an unpowered set—it saved time between moves.

Pebbles became robots; torn bits of cloth tied to cones distinguished sides and helped to designate pieces. By midafternoon they were ready. They were still playing their first game when darkness forced them to stop. As they lay down to sleep Max said, ’d better not take your hand. I’d knock over men in the dark.”

“I won’t sleep if you don’t—I won’t feel safe. Besides, that gorilla messed up one board changing the water.”

“That’s all right. I remember where they were.”

“Then you can just remember where they all are. Stretch out your arm.”

He groped in the darkness, found her fingers. “Night, Max. Sleep tight.”

“Good night, Ellie.”

Thereafter, they played from sunup to sundown. Their owner came once, watched them for an hour, went away without a snort. Once, when Ellie had fought him to a draw, Max said, “You know, Ellie, you play this game awfully well—for a girl.”

“Thank you too much.”

“No, I mean it. I suppose girls are probably as intelligent as men, but most of them don’t act like it. I think it’s because they don’t have to. If a girl is pretty, she doesn’t have to think. Of course, if she can’t get by on her looks, then—well, take you for example. If you …”

“Oh! So I’m ugly, Mr. Jones!”

“Wait a minute. I didn’t say that. Let’s suppose that you were the most beautiful woman since Helen of Troy. In that case, you would …” He found that he was talking to her back. She had swung round, grabbed her knees, and was ignoring him.

He stretched himself to the limit of his tether, bound leg straight out behind him, and managed to touch her shoulder. “Ellie?”

She shook off his hand. “Keep your distance! You smell like an old goat.”

“Well,” he said reasonably, “you’re no lily yourself. You haven’t had a bath lately either.”

“I know it!” she snapped, and started to sob. “And I hate it. I just … h- h- *hate* it. I look *awful.”*

“No, you don’t. Not to me.”

She turned a tear-wet and very dirty face. “Liar.”

“Nothing wrong that some soap and water won’t fix.”

“Oh, if only I had some.” She looked at him. “You aren’t at your best yourself, Mr. Jones. You need a haircut and the way your beard grows in patches is ghastly.”

He fingered the untidy stubble on his chin. “I can’t help it.”

“Neither can I.” She sighed. “Set up the boards again.”

Thereafter, she beat him three straight games, one with a disgraceful idiot’s mate. He looked at the boards sadly when it was over. “And you are the girl who flunked improper fractions?”

“Mr. Jones, has it ever occurred to you, the world being what it is, that women sometimes prefer not to appear too bright?” He was digesting this when she added, “I learned this game at my father’s knee, before I learned to read. I was junior

champion of Hespera before I got shanghaied. Stop by sometime and I'll show you my cup."

"Is that true? Really?"

"I'd rather play than eat—when I can find competition. But you're learning. Someday you'll be able to give me a good game."

"I guess I don't understand women."

"That's an understatement."

Max was a long time getting to sleep that night. Long after Eldreth was gently snoring he was still staring at the shining tail of the big comet, watching the shooting star trails, and thinking. None of his thoughts was pleasant.

Their position was hopeless, he admitted. Even though Chipsie had failed (he had never pinned much hope on her), searching parties should have found them by now. There was no longer any reason to think that they would be rescued.

And now Ellie was openly contemptuous of him. He had managed to hurt her pride again—again with his big, loose, flapping jaw! Why, he should have told her that she was the prettiest thing this side of paradise, if it would make her feel good—she had mighty little to feel good about these days!

Being captive had been tolerable because of her, he admitted—now he had nothing to look forward to but day after day of losing at three-dee while Ellie grimly proved that girls were as good as men and better. At the end of it they would wind up as an item in the diet of a thing that should never have been born.

If only Dr. Hendrix hadn't died!

If only he had been firm with Ellie when it mattered.

To top it off, and at the moment almost the worst of all, he felt that if he ate just one more of those blasted pawpaws it would gag him.

He was awakened by a hand on his shoulder and a whisper in his ear. "Max!"

"What the—?"

"Quiet! Not a sound."

It was Sam crouching over him—Sam!

As he sat up, sleep jarred out of him by adrenalin shock, he saw Sam move noiselessly to where Ellie slept. He squatted over her but did not touch her. "Miss Eldreth," he said softly.

Ellie's eyes opened and stared. She opened her mouth. Max was terrified that she might cry out. Sam hastily signed for silence; she looked at him and nodded. Sam knelt over her,

seemed to study something in the shadow-laced moonlight, then took out a hand gun. There was the briefest of low-energy discharges, entirely silent, and Ellie stood up—free. Sam returned to Max. “Hold still,” he whispered. “I don’t want to burn you.” He knelt over Max’s bound ankle.

When the gun flared, Max felt an almost paralyzing constriction around his ankle, then the thing fell off. The amputated major part contracted and jerked away into the shadows. Max stood up. “How—”

“Not a word. Follow me.” Sam led off into the bushes with Ellie behind him and Max following closely. They had gone only twenty yards when there was a whimpering cry of “Ellie!” and the spider puppy landed in Eldreth’s arms. Sam turned suddenly.

“Keep her quiet,” he whispered, “for your life.”

Ellie nodded and started petting the little creature, crooning to it voicelessly. When Chipsie tried to talk, she silenced it, then stuffed it inside her shirt. Sam waited these few moments, now started on without speaking.

They proceeded for several hundred yards as near silently as three people who believe their lives hang on it can manage. Finally, Sam stopped. “This is as far as we dare go,” he said in a low voice. “Any farther in the dark and I’d be lost. But I’m pretty sure we are outside their sleeping grounds. We’ll start again at the first light.”

“How did you get here in the dark, then?”

“I didn’t. Chips and I have been hiding in thick bushes since midaftemoon, not fifty feet from you.”

“Oh.” Max looked around, looked up at the stars. “I can take us back in the dark.”

“You can? It ’ud be a darn good thing. These babies don’t stir out at night—I think.”

“Let me get in the lead. You get behind Ellie.”

It took more than an hour to get to the edge of the tableland. The darkness, the undergrowth, the need for absolute silence, and the fact that Max had to take it slowly to keep his bearings despite his photographic memory all slowed them down. The trip downhill into the valley was even slower.

When they reached the edge of the trees with comparatively flat grassland in front Sam halted them and surveyed the valley by dim moonlight. “Mustn’t get caught in the open,” he whispered. “They can’t throw those snakes too well among trees, but out in the open—oh, brother!”

"You know about the throwing ropes?"

"Sure."

"Sam," whispered Ellie. "Mr. Anderson, why did …"

"Sssh!" he cautioned. "Explanations later. Straight across, at a dogtrot. Miss Eldreth, you set the pace. Max, pick your bearings and guide us. We'll run side by side. All set?"

"Just a minute." Max took the spider puppy from Eldreth, zipping it inside his shirt as she had done. Mr. Chips did not even wake up, but moaned softly like a disturbed baby. "Okay."

They ran and walked and ran again for a half hour or more, wasting no breath on words, putting everything into gaining distance from the centaur community. Knee-high grass and semi-darkness made the going hard. They were almost to the bottom of the valley and Max was straining to spot the stream when Sam called out, "Down! Down flat!"

Max hit dirt, taking it on his elbows to protect Chips; Ellie flopped beside him. Max turned his head cautiously and whispered, "Centaurs?"

"No. Shut up."

A hobgoblin balloon, moving at night to Max's surprise, was drifting across the valley at an altitude of about a hundred feet. Its course would take it past them, missing them by perhaps a hundred yards. Then it veered and came toward them.

It lost altitude and hovered almost over them. Max saw Sam aim carefully, steadying his pistol with both hands. There was momentarily a faint violet pencil from gun to hobgoblin; the creature burst and fell so close by that Max could smell burned meat. Sam returned his weapon and got to his feet. "One less spy," he said with satisfaction. "Let's get going, kids."

"You think those things spy?"

"'Think'? We know. Those polo ponies have this place *organized.* Pipe down and make miles."

Ellie found the stream by falling into it. They hauled her out and waded across, stopping only to drink. On the other bank Sam said, "Where's your left shoe, Miss Eldreth?"

"It came off in the brook."

Sam stopped to search but it was useless; the water looked like ink in the faint light. "No good," he decided. "We could waste the whole night. You're due for sore feet—sorry. Better throw away your other shoe."

It did not slow them until they reached the far ridge beyond which lay Charityville and the ship. Soon after they started up Ellie cut her right foot on a rock. She did her best, setting her

jaw and not complaining, but it handicapped them. There was a hint of dawn in the air by the time they reached the top. Max started to lead them down the arroyo that he and Ellie had come up so many year-long days ago. Sam stopped him. “Let me get this straight. This isn’t the draw that faces the ship, is it?”

“No, that one is just north of this.” Max reconstructed in his mind how it had looked from the ship and compared it with his memory of the photomap taken as the ship landed. “Actually, a shoulder just beyond the next draw faces the ship.”

“I thought so. This is the one Chips led me up, but I want us to stay in the trees as long as possible. It’ll be light by the time we’d be down to the flat.”

“Does it matter? There have never been any centaurs seen in the valley the ship is in.”

“You mean you never saw any. You’ve been away, old son. We’re in danger now—and in worse danger the closer we get to the ship. Keep your voice down—and lead us to that shoulder that sticks out toward the ship. If you can.”

Max could, though it meant going over strange terrain and keeping his bearings from his memory of a small-scale map. It involved “crossing the furrows,” too, instead of following a dry water course—which led to impasses such as thirty-foot drops that had to be gone painfully around. Sam grew edgy as the light increased and urged them to greater speed and greater silence even as Ellie’s increasingly crippled condition made his demands harder to meet.

“I really am sorry,” he whispered after she had to slide and scramble down a rock slope, checking herself with bare and bloody feet. “But it’s better to get there on stumps than to let them catch you.”

“I know.” Her face contorted but she made no sound. It was daylight by the time Max led them out on the shoulder. Silently, he indicated the ship, a half mile away. They were about level with its top.

“Down this way, I think,” he said quietly to Sam.

“No.”

“Huh?”

“Chilluns, it’s Uncle Sam’s opinion that we had better he doggo in those bushes, holding still and letting the beggar flies bite us, until after sundown.”

Max eyed the thousand yard gap. “We could run for it.”

“And four legs run faster than two legs. We’ve learned that lately.”

The bushes selected by Sam grew out to the edge of the shoulder. He crawled through them until he reached a place where he could spy the valley below while still hidden. Ellie and Max wriggled after him. The ground dropped off sharply just beyond them. The ship faced them, to their left and nearer was Charityville.

"Get comfortable," Sam ordered, "and we'll take turns keeping guard. Sleep if you can, this will be a long watch."

Max tried to shift Mr. Chips around so that he might he flat. A little head poked out of his collar.

"Good morning," the spider puppy said gravely. "Breakfast?"

"No breakfast, hon," Ellie told her. "Sam, is it all right to let her out?"

"I guess so. But keep her quiet." Sam was studying the plain below. Max did the same.

"Sam? Why don't we head for the village? It's closer."

"Nobody there. Abandoned."

"What? Look, Sam, can't you tell us now what's happened?"

Sam did not take his eyes off the plain. "Okay. But hold it down to whispers. What do you want to know?"

That was a hard one—Max wanted to know everything. "What happened to the village?"

"Gave it up. Too dangerous."

"Huh? Anybody caught?"

"Not permanently. Daigler had a gun. But then the fun began. We thought that all they had were those throwing snakes and that we had scared them off. But they've got lots more than that. Things that burrow underground, for example. That's why the village had to be abandoned."

"Anybody hurt?"

"Well … the newlyweds were already in residence. Becky Weberbauer is a widow."

Ellie gasped and Sam whispered sharply to be quiet. Max mulled it over before saying, "Sam, I don't see why, after they got my message, they didn't …"

"What message?"

Max explained. Sam shook his head. "The pooch got back all right. By then we knew you were missing and were searching for you—armed, fortunately. But there was no message."

"Huh? How did you find us?"

"Chips led me, I told you. But that was all. Somebody stuffed her into her old cage and that's where I found her yesterday. I stopped to pet her, knowing you were gone, Miss Eldreth—and

found the poor little thing nearly out of her mind. I finally got it through my head that she knew where you two were. So …" He shrugged.

"Oh. But I can't see," Max whispered, "why you risked it alone. You already knew they were dangerous; you should have had every man in the ship with you, armed."

Sam shook his head. "And we would have lost every man. A sneak was possible; the other wasn't. And we had to get you back."

"Thanks. I don't know how to say it, Sam. Anyhow, thanks."

"Yes," added Ellie, "and stop calling me 'Miss Eldreth.' I'm Ellie to my friends."

"Okay, Ellie. How are the feet?"

"I'll live."

"Good." He turned his head to Max. "But I didn't say we *wanted* to get you back, I said we *had* to. You, Max. No offense, Ellie."

"Huh? Why me?"

"Well …" Sam seemed reluctant. "You'll get the details when you get back. But it looks like you'll be needed if they take the ship off. You're the only astrogator left."

"Huh? What happened to Simes?"

"Quiet! He's dead."

"For Pete's sake." Max decided that, little as he liked Simes, death at the hands of the centaurs he would not have wished on any human; he said so.

"Oh, no, it wasn't that way. You see, when Captain Blaine died …"

"The Captain, *too?"*

"Yes."

"I knew he was sick, I didn't know he was that sick."

"Well, call it a broken heart. Or honorable hara-kiri. Or an accident. I found an empty box for sleeping pills when I helped pack his things. Maybe he took them, or maybe your pal Simes slipped them in his tea. The Surgeon certified natural causes and that's how it was logged. What is a natural cause when a man can't bear to live any longer?"

Ellie said softly, "He was a good man."

"Yes," agreed Sam. "Too good, maybe."

"But how about Simes?"

"Well, now, that was another matter. Simes seemed to feel that he was crown prince, but the First wouldn't stand for it. Something about some films the Chief Computerman had.

Anyhow, he tried to get tough with Walther and I sort of broke his neck. There wasn't time to be gentle," Sam added hastily. "Simes pulled a gun."

"Sam! You aren't in trouble?"

"None, except here and now. If we—quiet, kids!" He peered more sharply through the bushes. "Not a sound, not a movement," he whispered. "It may miss us."

A hobgoblin was drifting down from north, paralleling the ridge above and out from it, as if it were scouting the high land. Max said in Sam's ear, "Hadn't we better scrunch back?"

"Too late. Just hold still."

The balloon drifted abreast of them, stopped, then moved slowly toward them. Max saw that Sam had his gun out. He held his fire until the hobgoblin hovered above them. The shot burned needles and branches but it brought down the thing.

"Sam! There's another one!"

"Where?" Sam looked where Max pointed. The second hobgoblin apparently had been covering the first, higher and farther out. Even as they watched it veered away and gained altitude.

"Get it, Sam!"

Sam stood up. "Too late. Too far and too late. Well, kids, away we go. No need to keep quiet. Sit down and slide, Ellie; it'll save your feet some."

Down they went, scattering rocks and tearing their clothes, with Mr. Chips on her own and enjoying it. At the bottom Sam said, "Max, how fast can you do a half mile?"

"I don't know. Three minutes."

"Make it less. Get going. I'll help Ellie."

"No."

"You get there! You're needed."

"No!"

Sam sighed. "Always some confounded hero. Take her other arm."

They made a couple of hundred yards half carrying Eldreth, when she shook them off. "I can go faster alone," she panted.

"Okay, let's go!" Sam rasped.

She proved herself right. Ignoring her injured feet she pumped her short legs in a fashion which did not require Max's best speed to keep up, but nevertheless kept him panting. The ship grew larger ahead of them. Max saw that the cage was up and wondered how long it would take to attract attention and get it lowered.

They were half way when Sam shouted, “Here comes the cavalry! Speed it up!”

Max glanced over his shoulder. A herd of centaurs—a dozen, two dozen, perhaps more—was sweeping toward them from the hills on a diagonal plainly intended to cut them off. Ellie saw them too and did speed up, with a burst that momentarily outdistanced Max.

They had cut the distance to a few hundred yards when the cage swung free of the lock and sank lazily toward the ground. Max started to shout that they were going to make it when he heard the drum of hooves close behind. Sam yelled, “Beat it, kids! Into the ship.” He stopped.

Max stopped too, while shouting, *“Run,* Ellie!”

Sam snarled, “Run for it, I said! What can *you* do? Without a gun?”

Max hesitated, torn by an unbearable decision. He saw that Ellie had stopped. Sam glanced back, then backhanded Max across the mouth. “Get moving! Get her inside!”

Max moved, gathering Ellie in one arm and urging her on. Behind them Sam Anderson turned to face his death … dropping to one knee and steadying his pistol over his left forearm in precisely the form approved by the manual.

20
“—A SHIP IS NOT JUST STEEL—”

The cage hit the ground, four men swarmed out as Max stumbled inside and dumped Ellie on the floor. The door clanged shut behind them, but not too quickly for Mr. Chips. The spider puppy ran to Ellie, clutched her arm and wailed. Eldreth tried to sit up.

“You all right?” Max demanded.

“Uh, sure. But …” She shut up as Max whirled around and tried to open the cage door.

It would not open. It was not until then that he realized that the lift was off the ground and rising slowly. He punched the “stop” control.

Nothing happened, the car continued upward. About ten feet off the ground it stopped. Max looked up through the grille roof and shouted, “Hey! In the lock, there! Lower away!”

He was ignored. He tried the door again—uselessly, as its safety catch prevented it being opened when the cage was in the air. Frustrated and helpless, he grabbed the bars and looked out. He could see nothing of Sam. The centaurs were milling around in the middle distance. He saw one stumble and go down and then another. Then he saw the four men who had passed him. They were on their bellies in fair skirmish line not far from the cage, each with a shoulder gun and each firing carefully. The range was not great, about three hundred yards; they were taking steady toll. Each silent, almost invisible bolt picked off a centaur.

Max counted seven more centaur casualties—then the monsters broke and ran, scattering toward the hills. The firing continued and several more dropped before distance made firing uncertain.

Somebody shouted, “Hold your fire!” and one of the men stumbled to his feet and ran toward the center of the battle. The others got up and followed him.

When they came back they were carrying something that looked like a bundle of clothing. The cage lowered to the ground, they came inside and laid it gently on the floor. One of them glanced at Eldreth, then quickly removed his jacket and

laid it over Sam's face. Not until then did Max see that it was Mr. Walther.

The other three were Mr. Daigler, a power man whom Max knew only by sight, and Chief Steward Giordano. The fat man was crying openly. "The filthy vermin!" he sobbed. "He never had a chance. They just rode him down and trampled him." He choked, then added, "But he got at least five of 'em." His eyes rested on Max without recognition. "He made 'em pay."

Eldreth said gently, "Is he dead?"

"Huh? Of course. Don't talk silly." The steward turned his face away.

The car bumped to a stop. Walther looked in through the lock and said angrily, "Get those bystanders out of the way. What is this? A circus?" He turned back. "Let's get him in, men."

As he was bending to help, Max saw Eldreth being led away by Mrs. Dumont. Tenderly they carried Sam in and deposited him on the deck where the Surgeon was waiting. Walther straightened up and seemed to notice Max for the first time. "Mr. Jones? Will you see me in my stateroom as quickly as possible, please?"

"Aye aye, sir. But …" Max looked down at his friend. "I'd like to …"

Walther cut him short. "There's nothing you can do. Come away." He added more gently, "Make it fifteen minutes. That will give you time for a wash and a change."

Max presented himself on time, showered, his face hastily scraped, and in clean clothes—although lacking a cap. His one cap was somewhere in the far valley, lost on capture. He found Chief Engineer Compagnon and Mr. Samuels, the Purser, with the First Officer. They were seated around a table, having coffee. "Come in, Mr. Jones," Walther invited. "Sit down. Coffee?"

"Uh, yes, sir." Max discovered that he was terribly hungry. He loaded the brew with cream and sugar.

They sat for a few minutes, talking of unimportant matters, while Max drank his coffee and steadied down. Presently Walther said, "What shape are you in, Mr. Jones?"

"Why, all right, I guess, sir. Tired, maybe."

"I imagine so. I'm sorry to have to disturb you. Do you know the situation now?"

"Partly, sir. Sam told me … Sam Anderson …" His voice broke.

"We're sorry about Anderson," Mr. Walther said soberly. "In

many ways, he was one of the best men I ever served with. But go on."

Max recounted what Sam had had time to tell him, but shortened the statements about Simes and Captain Blaine to the simple fact that they were dead. Walther nodded. "Then you know what we want of you?"

"I think so, sir. You want to raise the ship, so you want me to astrogate." He hesitated. "I suppose I can."

"Mmm … yes. But that's not all."

"Sir?"

"You must be Captain."

All three had their eyes fixed on him. Max felt lightheaded and for a moment wondered what was wrong. Their faces seemed to swell and then recede. He realized vaguely that he had had little to eat and almost no sleep for many hours and had been running on nerve—yes, that must be what was wrong with him. From a long distance away he heard Walther's voice: " … utterly necessary to leave this planet without delay. Now our legal position is clear. In space, only an astrogation officer may command. You are being asked to assume command responsibility while very young but you are the only qualified person—therefore you *must* do it."

Max pulled himself together, the wavering figures came into focus. "Mr. Walther?"

"Yes?"

"But I'm not an astrogator. I'm just a probationary apprentice."

Chief Engineer Compagnon answered him. "Kelly says you're an astrogator," he growled.

"Kelly is more of an astrogator than I am!"

Compagnon shook his head. "You can't pass judgment on yourself." Samuels nodded agreement.

"Let's dispose of that," Walther added. "There is no question of the Chief Computerman becoming captain. Nor does your rank in your guild matter. Line of command, underway, necessarily is limited to astrogators. You are senior in that line, no matter how junior you feel. At this moment, I hold command —until I pass it on. But I can't take a ship into space. If you refuse … well, I don't know what we will have to do. I don't know."

Max gulped and said, "Look, sir, I'm not refusing duty. I'll astrogate—shucks, I suppose it's all right to call me the

astrogator, under the circumstances. But there is no reason to pretend that I'm captain. You stay in command while I conn the ship. That's best, sir—I wouldn't know how to *act* like a captain."

Walther shook his head. "Not legally possible."

Compagnon added, "I don't care about the legalities. But I know that responsibility can't be divided. Frankly, young fellow, I'd rather have Dutch as skipper than you—but he can't astrogate. I'd be delighted to have Doc Hendrix—but he's gone. I'd rather hold the sack myself than load it on you—but I'm a physicist and I know just enough of the math of astrogation to know that I couldn't in a lifetime acquire the speed that an astrogator *has* to have. Not my temperament. Kelly says you've got it already. I've shipped with Kelly a good many years, I trust him. So it's your pidgin, son; you've got to take it—and the authority that goes with it. Dutch will help—we'll all help—but you can't duck out and hand him the sack."

Mr. Samuels said quietly, "I don't agree with the Chief Engineer about the unimportance of legal aspects; most of these laws have wise reasons behind them. But I agree with what else he says. Mr. Jones, a ship is not just steel, it is a delicate political entity. Its laws and customs cannot be disregarded without inviting disaster. It will be far easier to maintain morale and discipline in this ship with a young captain—with all his officers behind him—than it would be to let passengers and crew suspect that the man who *must* make the crucial decisions, those life-and-death matters involving the handling of the ship, that this all-powerful man nevertheless can't be trusted to command the ship. No, sir, such a situation would frighten me; that is how mutinies are born."

Max felt his heart pounding, his head was aching steadily. Walther looked at him grimly and said, "Well?"

"I'll take it." He added, "I don't see what else I can do."

Walther stood up. "What are your orders, Captain?"

Max sat still and tried to slow his heart. He pressed his fingers to throbbing temples and looked frightened. "Uh, continue with routine. Make preparations to raise ship."

"Aye aye, sir." Walther paused, then added, "May I ask when the Captain plans to raise ship?"

He was having trouble focusing again. "When? Not before tomorrow—tomorrow at noon. I've got to have a night's sleep." He thought to himself that Kelly and he could throw it into a

parking orbit, which would get them away from the centaurs—then stop to figure out his next move.

"I think that's wise, sir. We need the time."

Compagnon stood up. "If the Captain will excuse me, sir, I'll get my department started."

Samuels joined him. "Your cabin is ready, sir—I'll have your personal effects moved in in a few minutes."

Max stared at him. He had not yet assimilated the side implications of his new office. Use Captain Blaine's holy of holies? Sleep in his bed? "Uh, I don't think that's necessary. I'm comfortable where I am."

Samuels glanced at the First Officer, then said, "If you please, Captain, this is one of the things I was talking about when I said that a ship is a delicate political entity."

"Eh?" Max thought about it, then suddenly felt both the burden descend on him and the strength to meet it. "Very well," he answered, his voice deepening. "Do it."

"Yes, sir." Samuels looked at him. "Also, Captain—if you wish it—I'll have Lopez stop in and trim your hair."

Max pushed locks back of his ear. "It *is* shaggy, isn't it? Very well."

The Purser and the Chief Engineer left. Max stood for a moment uncertainly, not sure what his next cue was in this new role. Walther said, "Captain? Can you spare me a few more minutes?"

"Oh, certainly." They sat down and Walther poured more coffee. Max said, "Mr. Walther? Do you suppose we could ring the pantry and get some toast? I haven't eaten today."

"Why, surely! Sorry, sir." Instead of ringing, the First Officer phoned and ordered a high tea. Then he turned to Max. "Captain, I didn't give you all the story—nor did I wish to until we were alone."

"So?"

"Don't misunderstand me. My turning over command to you did not depend on these other matters—nor is it necessary for your officers to know everything that the Captain knows … even your department heads."

"Uh, I suppose not."

Walther stared at his coffee. "Have you heard how Mr. Simes happened to die?"

Max told him what little he had learned from Sam. Walther nodded. "That is essentially correct. Mmmm … It is not good to speak ill of the dead, but Simes was an unstable character.

When Captain Blaine passed on, he took it for granted that he was immediately captain of this ship."

"Well—I suppose it looked that way to him, from the legal standpoint."

"Not at all! Sorry to correct you, Captain, but that is one hundred percent wrong."

Max frowned. "I guess I'm dumb—but I thought that was the argument that was used on me?"

"No, sir. The ship being on the ground, command devolved on me, the senior. I am not required to turn command over to an astrogator until—and *unless*—the ship goes into space. Even then it is not automatically a matter of turning it over to the senior astrogating officer. I have a clearly defined responsibility, with numerous adjudicated cases in point: I must turn command over only to a man I believe can handle it.

"Now I have long had doubts about Mr. Simes, his temperament, I mean. Nevertheless, in this emergency, I would have found it terribly hard *not* to turn command over to him, once it was decided to raise ship. But before we lost the Captain I had had occasion to dig into Mr. Simes' ability as an astrogator—partly as a result of a conversation with you. I talked with Kelly—as you have gathered, Kelly is *very* well thought of. I believe I know now how that last transition went sour; Kelly took pains to show me. That and the fact that Kelly told me bluntly that there wasn't a member of the Worry gang willing to go into space under Mr. Simes made me decide that, if it ever came up, I'd let this ship sit here forever before I would let Simes be captain. That was just thinking ahead; the Captain was sick and prudence forced me to consider possibilities.

"Then the Captain did die—and Simes announced that he was captain. The fool even moved into the cabin and sent for me. I told him he was not in command and never would be. Then I left, got witnesses and took my chief of police along to eject him. You know what happened. Your life isn't the only one that Anderson saved; I owe him mine, too."

Walther abruptly changed the subject. "That phenomenal trick of memory you do—computing without tables or reference books. Can you do it all the time?"

"Uh? Why, yes."

"Do you know all the tables? Or just some of them?"

"I know all the standard tables and manuals that are what an astrogator calls his 'working tools.'" Max started to tell about his uncle, Walther interrupted gently.

"If you please, sir. I'm glad to hear it. I'm *very* glad to hear it. Because the only such books in this ship are the ones in your head."

Kelly had missed the books, of course—not Walther. When he disclosed his suspicions to Walther, the two conducted a search. When that failed, it was announced that one (but only one) set was missing; Walther had offered a reward, and the ship had been combed from stern to astrodome—no manuals.

"I suppose he ditched them dirtside," Walther finished. "You know where that leaves us—we're in a state of seige. And we'd find them only by accident if we weren't. So I'm very glad you have the same confidence in your memory that Kelly has."

Max was beginning to have misgivings—it is one thing to do something as a stunt, quite another to do it of necessity. "It isn't that bad," he answered. "Perhaps Kelly never thought of it, but logarithms and binary translation tables can probably be borrowed from engineering—with those we could fudge up methods for any straight hop. The others are needed mostly for anomalous transitions."

"Kelly thought of that, too. Tell me, Captain, how does a survey ship go back after it penetrates a newly located congruency?"

"Huh? So *that* is what you want me to do with the ship?"

"It is not for me," Walther said formally, "to tell the Captain where to take his ship."

Max said slowly, "I've thought about it. I've had a lot of time to think lately." He did not add that he had dwelt on it nights in captivity to save his reason. "Of course, we don't have the instruments that survey ships carry, nor does applied astrogation go much into the theory of calculating congruencies. And even some survey ships don't come back.

"But …" They were interrupted by a knock on the door. A steward's mate came in and loaded the table with food. Max felt himself starting to drool.

He spread a slice of toast with butter and jam, and took a big bite. "My, this is good!"

"I should have realized. Have a banana, sir? They look quite good—I believe hydroponics has had to thin them out lately."

Max shuddered. "I don't think I'll ever eat bananas again. Or pawpaws."

"Allergic, Captain?"

"Not exactly. Well … yes."

He finished the toast and said, “About that possibility. I’ll let you know later.”

“Very well, Captain.”

Shortly before the dinner hour, Max stood in front of the long mirror in the Captain’s bedroom and looked at himself. His hair was short again and two hours sleep had killed some of his fatigue. He settled a cap on his head at the proper angle—the name in the sweat band was “Hendrix”; he had found it laid out with one of his own uniforms to which captain’s insignia had been added. The sunburst on his chest bothered him—that he was indeed captain he conceded, even though it seemed like a wild dream, but he had felt that he was not entitled to anything but the smaller sunburst and circle, despite his four stripes.

Walther and Samuels had been respectful but firm, with Samuels citing precedents that Max could not check on. Max had given in.

He looked at himself, braced his shoulders, and sighed. He might as well go face them. As he walked down the companionway to the lounge he heard the speakers repeating, “All hands! All passengers! Report to Bifrost Lounge!”

The crowd made way for him silently. He went to the Captain’s table—*his* table!—and sat down at its head. Walther was standing by the chair. “Good evening, Captain.”

“Evening, Mr. Walther.”

Ellie was seated across from him. She caught his eye and smiled. “Hello, Ellie.” He felt himself blushing.

“Good evening, Captain,” she said firmly. She was dressed in the same high style she had worn the first time he had ever seen her in the lounge; it did not seem possible that this lady could be the same girl whose dirty face had looked at him over three-dee boards scratched in dirt.

“Uh, how are your feet?”

“Bandages and bedroom slippers. But the Surgeon did a fine job. I’ll be dancing tomorrow.”

“Don’t rush it.”

She looked at his stripes and his chest. “*You* should talk.”

Before he could answer the unanswerable Walther leaned over and said quietly, “We’re ready, Captain.”

“Oh. Go ahead.” Walther tapped on a water glass.

The First Officer explained the situation in calm tones that made it seem reasonable, inevitable. He concluded by saying, “ … and so, in accordance with law and the custom of space, I

have relinquished my temporary command to your new captain. Captain Jones."

Max stood up. He looked around, swallowed, tried to speak, and couldn't. Then, as effectively as if it had been a dramatic pause and not desperation, he picked up his water tumbler and took a sip. "Guests and fellow crewmen," he said, "we can't stay here. You know that. I have been told that our Surgeon calls the system we are up against here 'symbiotic enslavement'—like dog to man, only more so, and apparently cover ing the whole animal kingdom on this planet. Well, men aren't meant for slavery, symbiotic or any sort, but we are too few to win out now, so we must leave."

He stopped for another sip and Ellie caught his eye, encouraging him. "Perhaps someday other men will come back—better prepared. As for us, I am going to try to take the *Asgard* back through the … uh, 'hole' you might call it, where we came out. It's a chancy thing. No one is forced to come along—but it is the only possible way to get home. Anyone who's afraid to chance it will be landed on the north pole of planet number three—the evening star we have been calling 'Aphrodite.' You may be able to survive there, although it is pretty hot even at the poles. If you prefer that alternative, turn your names in this evening to the Purser. The rest of us will try to get home." He stopped, then said suddenly, "That's all," and sat down.

There was no applause and he felt glumly that he had muffed his first appearance. Conversation started up around the room, crewmen left, and steward's mates quickly started serving. Ellie looked at him and nodded quietly. Mrs. Mendoza was on his left; she said, "Ma—I mean 'Captain'—is it really so dangerous? I hardly like the thought of trying anything *risky*. Isn't there something else we can do?"

"No."

"But surely there must be?"

"No. I'd rather not discuss it at the table."

"But …" He went on firmly spooning soup, trying not to tremble. When he looked up he was caught by a glittering eye across the table, a Mrs. Montefiore, who preferred to be called "Principessa"—a dubious title. "Dolores, don't bother him. We want to hear about his adventures—don't we, Captain?"

"No."

"Come now! I hear that it was terribly *romantic."* She drawled the word and gave Ellie a sly, sidelong look. She looked back at Max with the eye of a predatory bird and showed her teeth. She

seemed to have more teeth than was possible. “Tell us *all* about it!”

“No.”

“But you simply *can’t* refuse!”

Eldreth smiled at her and said, “Princess darling—your mouth is showing.” Mrs. Montefiore shut up.

After dinner Max caught Walther alone. “Mr. Walther?”

“Oh yes, Captain?”

“Am I correct in thinking that it is my privilege to pick the persons who sit at my table?”

“Yes, sir.”

“In that case—that Montefiore female. Will you have her moved, please? Before breakfast?”

Walther smiled faintly. “Aye aye, sir.”

21
THE CAPTAIN OF THE *ASGARD*

They took Sam down and buried him where he had fallen. Max limited it to himself and Walther and Giordano, sending word to Ellie not to come. There was a guard of honor, but it was armed to kill and remained spread out around the grave, eyes on the hills. Max read the service in a voice almost too low to be heard —the best he could manage.

Engineering had hurriedly prepared the marker, a pointed slab of stainless metal. Max looked at it before he placed it and thought about the inscription. "Greater love hath no man"?—no, he had decided that Sam wouldn't like that, with his cynical contempt of all sentimentality. He had considered, "He played the cards he was dealt"—but that didn't fit Sam either; if Sam didn't like the cards, he sometimes slipped in a whole new deck. No, this was more Sam's style; he shoved it into the ground and read it:

IN MEMORY OF
SERGEANT SAM ANDERSON
LATE OF THE
IMPERIAL MARINES
"He ate what was set before him."

Walther saw the marker for the first time. "So that's how it was? Somehow I thought so."

"Yes. I never did know his right name. Richards. Or maybe Roberts."

"Oh." Walther thought over the implication. "We could get him reinstated, sir, posthumously. His prints will identify him."

"I think Sam would like that."

"I'll see to it, sir, when we get back."

"If we get back."

"If you please, Captain—*when* we get back."

Max went straight to the control room. He had been up the evening before and had gotten the first shock of being treated as captain in the Worry Hole over with. When Kelly greeted him with, "Good morning, Captain," he was able to be almost casual.

"Morning, Chief. Morning, Lundy."

“Coffee, sir?”

“Thanks. About that parking orbit—is it set up?”

“Not yet, sir.”

“Then forget it. I’ve decided to head straight back. We can plan it as we go. Got the films?”

“I picked them up earlier.” They referred to the films cached in Max’s stateroom. Simes had managed to do away with the first set at the time of Captain Blaine’s death; the reserve set was the only record of when and where the *Asgard* had emerged into this space, including records of routine sights taken immediately after transition.

“Okay. Let’s get busy. Kovak can punch for me.”

The others were drifting in, well ahead of time, as was customary in Kelly’s gang. “If you wish, sir. I’d be glad to compute for the Captain.”

“Kovak can do it. You might help Noguchi and Lundy with the films.”

“Aye aye, sir.” Data flowed to him presently. He had awakened twice in the night in cold fright that he had lost his unique memory. But when the data started coming, he programmed without effort, appropriate pages opening in his mind. The problem was a short departure to rid themselves of the planet’s influence, an adjustment of position to leave the local sun “behind” for simpler treatment of its field, then a long, straight boost for the neighborhood in which they had first appeared in this space. It need not be precise, for transition would not be attempted on the first pass; they must explore the area, taking many more photographic sights and computing from them, to establish a survey that had never been made.

Departure was computed and impressed on tape for the autopilot and the tape placed in the console long before noon. The ship had been keeping house on local time, about fifty-five standard minutes to the hour; now the ship would return to Greenwich, the time always kept in the control room—dinner would be late and some of the “beasts” would as usual reset their watches the wrong way and blame it on the government.

They synchronized with the power room, the tape started running; there remained nothing to do but press the button a few seconds before preset time and thereby allow the autopilot to raise ship. The phone rang, Smythe took it and looked at Max. “For you, Captain. The Purser.”

“Captain?” Samuels sounded worried. “I dislike to disturb you in the control room.”

"No matter. What is it?"

"Mrs. Montefiore. She wants to be landed on Aphrodite."

Max thought a moment, "Anybody else change his mind?"

"No, sir."

"They were all notified to turn in their names last night."

"I pointed that out to her, sir. Her answers were not entirely logical."

"Nothing would please me more than to dump her there. But after all, we are responsible for her. Tell her no."

"Aye aye, sir. May I have a little leeway in how I express it?"

"Certainly. Just keep her out of my hair."

Max flipped off the phone, found Kelly at his elbow. "Getting close, sir. Perhaps you will take the console now and check the set up? Before you raise?"

"Eh? No, you take her up, Chief. You'll have the first watch."

"Aye aye, Captain." Kelly sat down at the console, Max took the Captain's seat, feeling self-conscious. He wished that he had learned to smoke a pipe—it looked right to have the Captain sit back, relaxed and smoking his pipe, while the ship maneuvered.

He felt a slight pulsation and was pressed more firmly into the chair cushions; the *Asgard* was again on her own private gravity, independent of true accelerations. Moments later, the ship raised, but with nothing to show it but the change out the astrodome from blue sky to star-studded ebony of space.

Max got up and found that he was still holding an imaginary pipe, he hastily dropped it. "I'm going below, Chief. Call me when the departure sights are ready to compute. By the way, what rotation of watches do you plan on?"

Kelly locked the board, got up and joined him. "Well, Captain, I had figured on Kovak and me heel-and- toe, with the boys on one in three. We'll double up later."

Max shook his head. "No. You and me and Kovak. And we'll stay on one in three as long as possible. No telling how long we'll fiddle around out there before we take a stab at it."

Kelly lowered his voice. "Captain, may I express an opinion?"

"Kelly, any time you stop being frank with me, I won't have a chance of swinging this. You know that."

"Thank you, sir. The Captain should not wear himself out. You have to do all the computing as it is." Kelly added quietly, "The safety of your ship is more important than—well, perhaps 'pride' is the word."

Max took a long time to reply. He was learning, without the benefit of indoctrination, that a commanding officer is not

permitted foibles commonplace in any other role; he himself is ruled more strongly by the powers vested in him than is anyone else. The Captain's privileges—such as chucking a tiresome female from his table—were minor, while the penalties of the inhuman job had unexpected ramifications.

"Chief," he said slowly, "is there room to move the coffee mess over behind the computer?"

Kelly measured the space with his eye. "Yes, sir. Why?"

"I was thinking that would leave room over here to install a cot."

"You intend to sleep up here, sir?"

"Sometimes. But I was thinking of all of us—you shave up here half the time, as it is. The watches for the next few weeks do not actually require the O.W. to be awake most of the time, so we'll all doss off when we can. What do you think?"'

"It's against regulations, sir. A bad precedent … and a bad example." He glanced over at Noguchi and Smythe.

"You would write it up formal and proper, for my signature, citing the regulation and suspending it on an emergency basis 'for the safety of the ship.'"

"If you say so, sir."

"You don't sound convinced, so maybe I'm wrong. Think it over and let me know."

The cot appeared and the order was posted, but Max never saw either Kelly or Kovak stretched out on the cot. As for himself, had he not used it, he would have had little sleep.

He usually ate in the control room as well. Although there was little to do on their way out to rendezvous with nothingness but take sights to determine the relations of that nothingness with surrounding sky, Max found that when he was not computing he was worrying, or discussing his worries with Kelly.

How did a survey ship find its way back through a newly calculated congruency? And what had gone wrong with those that failed to come back? Perhaps Dr. Hendrix could have figured the other side of an uncharted congruency using only standard ship's equipment—or perhaps not. Max decided that Dr. Hendrix could have done it; the man had been a fanatic about his profession, with a wide knowledge of the theoretical physics behind the routine numerical computations—much wider, Max was sure, than most astrogators.

Max knew that survey ships calculated congruences from both sides, applying to gravitational field theory data gathered on the

previously unknown side. He made attempts to rough out such a calculation, then gave up, having no confidence in his results—he was sure of his mathematical operations but unsure of theory and acutely aware of the roughness of his data. There was simply no way to measure accurately the masses of stars light-years away with the instruments in the *Asgard*.

Kelly seemed relieved at his decision. After that, they both gave all their time to an attempt to lay out a "groove" to the unmarked point in the heavens where their photosights said that they had come out—in order that they might eventually scoot down that groove, arriving at the locus just below the speed of light, then kick her over and hope.

A similar maneuver on a planet's surface would be easy—but there is no true parallel with the situation in the sky. The "fixed" stars move at high speeds and there are no other landmarks; to decide what piece of featureless space corresponds with where one was at another time requires a complicated series of calculations having no "elegant" theoretical solutions. For each charted congruency, an astrogator has handed to him a table of precalculated solutions—the "Critical Tables for Charted Anomalies." Max and Kelly had to fudge up their own.

Max spent so much time in the control room that the First Officer finally suggested that passenger morale would be better if he could show himself in the lounge occasionally. Walther did not add that Max should wear a smile and a look of quiet confidence, but he implied it. Thereafter, Max endeavored to dine with his officers and passengers.

He had of course seen very little of Eldreth. When he saw her at the first dinner after Walther's gentle suggestion, she seemed friendly but distant. He decided that she was treating him with respect, which made him wonder if she were ill. He recalled that she had originally come aboard in a stretcher, perhaps she was not as rugged as she pretended to be. He made a mental note to ask the Surgeon—indirectly, of course!

They were dawdling over coffee and Max was beginning to fidget with a desire to get back to the Worry Hole. He reminded himself sharply that Walther expected him not to show anxiety—then looked around and said loudly, "This place is like a morgue. Doesnanyone dance here these days? Dumont!"

"Yes, Captain?"

"Let's have some dance music. Mrs. Mendoza, would you honor me?"

Mrs. Mendoza tittered and accepted. She turned out to be a disgrace to Argentina, no sense of rhythm. But he piloted her around with only minor collisions and got her back to her chair, so timed that he could bow out gracefully. He then exercised the privilege of rank by cutting in on Mrs. Daigler. Maggie's hair was still short but her splendor otherwise restored.

"We've missed you, Captain."

"I've been working. Short-handed, you know."

"I suppose so. Er … Captain, is it pretty soon now?"

"Before we transit? Not long. It has taken this long because we have had to do an enormous number of fiddlin' calculations —to be safe, you know."

"Are we *really* going home?"

He gave what he hoped was a confident smile. "Absolutely. Don't start any long book from the ship's library; the Purser won't let you take it dirtside."

She sighed. "I feel better."

He thanked her for the waltz, looked around, saw Mrs. Montefiore and decided that his obligation to maintain morale did not extend that far. Eldreth was seated, so he went to her. "Feet still bothering you, Ellie?"

"No, Captain. Thank you for asking."

"Then will you dance with me?"

She opened her eyes wide. "You mean the Captain has time for po' li'l ole me?"

He leaned closer. "One more crack like that, dirty face, and you'll be tossed into irons."

She giggled and wrinkled her nose. "Aye aye, Captain, sir."

For awhile, they danced without talking, with Max a little overpowered by her nearness and wondering why he had not done this sooner. Finally she said, "Max? Have you given up three-dee permanently?"

"Huh? Not at all. After we make this transit I'll have time to play—if you'll spot me two starships."

"I'm sorry I ever told you about that. But I do wish you would say hello to Chipsie sometimes. She was asking this morning, "Where Maxie?"

"Oh, I *am* sorry. I'd take her up to the control room with me occasionally, except that she might push a button and lose us a month's work. Go fetch her."

"The crowd would make her nervous. We'll go see her."

He shook his head. "Not to your room."

"Huh? Don't be silly. I've got no reputation left anyhow, and a

captain can do as he pleases."

"That shows you've never been a captain. See that vulture watching us?" He indicated Mrs. Montefiore with his eyes. "Now go get Chipsie and no more of your back talk."

"Aye aye, Captain."

He scratched Chipsie's chin, fed her sugar cubes, and assured her that she was the finest spider puppy in that part of the sky. He then excused himself.

He was feeling exhilarated and oddly reassured. Seeing Mr. Walther disappearing into his room, he paused at the companionway and on impulse followed him. A matter had been worrying him, this was as good a time as any.

"Dutch? Are you busy?"

The First Officer turned. "Oh. No, Captain. Come in."

Max waited during the ceremonial coffee, then broached it. "Something on my mind, Mr. Walther—a personal matter."

"Anything I can do?"

"I don't think so. But you're a lot more experienced than I am; I'd like to tell you about it."

"If the Captain wishes."

"Look, Dutch, this is a 'Max' matter, not a 'Captain' matter."

Walther smiled. "All right. But don't ask me to change my form of address. I might pick up a bad habit."

"Okay, okay." Max had intended to sound out Walther about his phony record: had Dr. Hendrix reported it? Or hadn't he?

But he found it impossible to follow that line; being a captain had forced him into a different mold. "I want to tell you how I got into this ship." He told it all, not suppressing Sam's part now that it no longer could hurt Sam. Walther listened gravely.

"I've been waiting for you to mention this, Captain," he said at last. "Dr. Hendrix reported it to me, in less detail, when he put you up for apprentice astrogator. We agreed that it was a matter that need not be raised inside the ship."

"It's what happens after we get back that frets me. If we get back."

"When we get back. Are you asking for advice? Or help? Or what?"

"I don't know. I just wanted to tell you."

"Mmmm … there are two alternatives. One we could handle here, by altering a not very important report. In which …"

"No, Dutch. I won't have phony reports going out of the *Asgard*."

"I was fairly certain you would say that. I feel the same way,

except that I would feel obligated for—well, various reasons—to cover up for you if you asked it."

"I once intended to arrange a phony on it. I even felt justified. But I can't do it now."

"I understand. The remaining alternative is to report it and face the music. In which case I'll see it through with you—and so will the Chief Engineer and the Purser, I feel sure."

Max sat back, feeling warm and happy. "Thanks, Dutch. I don't care what they do to me … just as long as it doesn't keep me out of space."

"I don't think they'll try to do that, not if you bring this ship in. But if they do—well, they'll know they've been in a fight. Meantime, try to forget it."

"I'll try." Max frowned. "Dutch? Tell me the truth, what do *you* think about the stunt I pulled?"

"That's a hard question, Captain. More important is how do you feel about it?"

"Me? I don't know. I know how I used to feel—I felt belligerent."

"Eh?"

"I was always explaining—in my mind of course, why I did it, justifying myself, pointing out that the system was at fault, not me. Now I don't want to justify myself. Not that I regret it, not when I think what I would have missed. But I don't want to duck out of paying for it, either."

Walther nodded. "That sounds like a healthy attitude. Captain, no code is perfect. A man must conform with judgment and commonsense, not with blind obedience. I've broken rules; some violations I paid for, some I didn't. This mistake you made could have turned you into a moralistic prig, a 'Regulation Charlie' determined to walk the straight and narrow and to see that everyone else obeyed the letter of the law. Or it could have made you a permanent infant who thinks rules are for everyone but him. It doesn't seem to have had either effect; I think it has matured you."

Max grinned. "Well, thanks, Dutch." He stood up. "I'll get back up to the Hole and mess up a few figures."

"Captain? Are you getting enough sleep?"

"Me? Oh, sure, I get a nap almost every watch."

"Minus four hours, Captain." Max sat up on the cot in the control room, rubbing sleep out of his eyes. The *Asgard* was in the groove, had been boosting along it for days, working up to

that final burst that would squeeze them out of this space and into another—one they knew or some other, depending on how well their "fudging" had conformed to the true structure of the universe.

Max blinked at Kelly. "How long have you been up here?"

"Not long, Captain."

"Did you get *any* sleep?"

"Well, now, Captain …"

"Forget it, you're incorrigible. Got one ready?"

"Yes, sir."

"Shoot." Max sat on the cot while they passed data to him, eyes closed while he programmed the problem and translated it into the binary numbers the computer understood. He had not been out of the Hole more than a few minutes at a time for days. He would doze between sights, wake up and process one, then he went down again.

He had kept Kelly and Kovak on watch-and-watch as long as possible—although it was hard to get Kelly to rest. Lundy, Smythe, and Noguchi had continued to rotate, overlapping when the going got faster in order to help each other with plate changing and readings. For Max there could be no relief; he must process each sight, supplying from his card-file memory the information in the missing manuals.

All the Worry gang were there but Lundy. He came up as Max finished and ordered the correction. "Compliments of cookie," he announced, setting down a gallon of ice cream.

"What flavor?" asked Max.

"Chocolate chip, sir."

"My favorite. Just remember when you are dishing it that efficiency marks will be coming up one of these days."

"Now, Captain, that's not fair. The Chief has a lot more mass to feed than you have."

"And I have a very high metabolic rate," announced Noguchi. "I need more."

"Noggy, you have a built-in space warp in each leg. We'll let Kelly dish it and hope that pride will restrain him." Max turned to Kelly. "What schedule are we on?"

"Twenty minutes, Captain."

"Think we need that so soon?"

"Just to be safe, sir."

"Okay." They ran another sight and ate the ice cream, after which Max shifted them to transition stations. Kelly did not take the computer. A key punched by Kovak gave the same answer as

one punched by Kelly, and Max wanted Kelly on the vernier stereograph where his long experience could make the best of poor data. Lundy assisted Kelly, with Smythe and Noguchi shooting and running.

At minus two hours, Max called Compagnon, told him that they were narrowing down; the Chief Engineer assured him that he would nurse boost and vector himself from there on. “Good hunting, Captain.”

On a ten-minute schedule, Max still found it easy, though he had to admit he wasn’t as fresh as a still-warm egg. But he was kept comfortably busy and the corrections were pleasantly small—Compagnon must be doing a real job down there. When the preset on the computer said less than one hour to zero, he stood up and stretched. “Everybody all set. Somebody wake up Noggy. Everybody got a pepper pill in him? And who’s got one for me?”

Kovak leaned back and handed him one, Max popped it into his mouth and downed it with a swig of coffee. “Grab a last sandwich if you’re going to. All right, gang—let’s hit it!”

The data flowed in a steady stream. After a while, Max began to tire. He would no more than pick one correction off the lights on the computer and feed it to the power room than Kelly would have more data ready. A correction showed up that seemed off the curve, as if they were “hunting” excessively. He glanced back at the lights before applying it—then realized that a new set of data was being offered.

“Repeat!” he called out.

Kelly repeated. Max ran the figures over in his mind and found that they meant nothing to him. What had that last correction implied? Had he used a legitimate method in surveying this anomaly? Could you even call it surveying? Was this what a survey ship did to get out? How could they expect a man to …

“Captain!” Kelly said sharply.

He shook his head and sat up. “Sorry. Hold the next one.” With a feeling of panic, he reviewed the data in his mind and tried to program. He knew at last how it felt to have the deadline bearing down fast as light—and to lose confidence.

He told himself that he must abort—slide past under the speed of light, spend weeks swinging back, and try again. But he knew that if he did, his nerve would never sustain him for a second try.

At that bad moment, a feeling came over him that someone was standing behind his chair, resting hands on his shoulders—

quieting him, soothing him. He began clearly and sharply to call off figures to Kovak.

He was still calling them out with the precision of an automaton twenty minutes later. He accepted one more sight, digested it, sent it on to Kovak with his eyes on the preset. He applied the correction, a tiny one, and called out, "Stand by!" He pressed the button that allowed the chronometer to kick it over on the microsecond. Only then did he look around, but there was no one behind him.

"There's the Jeep!" he heard Kelly say exultantly. "And there's the Ugly Duckling!" Max looked up. They were back in the familiar sky of Nu Pegasi and Halcyon.

Five minutes later, Kelly and Max were drinking cold coffee and cleaning up the remains of a plate of sandwiches while Noguchi and Smythe completed the post-transition sights. Kovak and Lundy had gone below for a few minutes relief before taking the first watch. Max glanced again at the astrodome. "So we made it. I never thought we would."

"Really, Captain? There was never any doubt in my mind after you took command."

"Hmmm! I'm glad you didn't know how I felt."

Kelly ignored this. "You know, sir, when you are programming your voice sounds amazingly like the Doctor's."

Max looked at him sharply. "I had a bad time there once," he said slowly. "Shortly before zip."

"Yes, sir. I know."

"Then—Look, this was just a *feeling,* you see? I don't go for ghosts. But I had the notion that Doc was standing over me, the way he used to, checking what I did. Then everything was all right."

Kelly nodded. "Yes. He was here. I was sure he would be."

"Huh? What do you mean?" Kelly would not explain. He turned instead to inspect post-transition plates, comparing them happily with standard plates from the chart safe—the first such opportunity since the ship was lost.

"I suppose," said Max when Kelly was through, "that we had better rough out an orbit for Nu Pegasi before we sack in." He yawned. "Brother, am I dead!"

Kelly said, "For Nu Pegasi, sir?"

"Well, we can't shoot for Halcyon itself at this distance. What did you have in mind?"

"Nothing, sir."

"Spill it."

"Well, sir, I guess I had assumed that we would reposition for transit to Nova Terra. But if that is what the Captain wants—"

Max drummed on the chart safe. It had never occurred to him that anyone would expect him to do anything, after accomplishing the impossible, but to shape course for the easy, target-in-sight destination they had left from, there to wait for competent relief.

"You expected me to take her on through? With no tables and no help?"

"I did not intend to presume, Captain. It was an unconscious assumption."

Max straightened up. "Tell Kovak to hold her as she goes. Phone Mr. Walther to see me at once in my cabin."

"Aye aye, sir."

The First Officer met him outside his cabin. "Hello, Dutch. Come in." They entered and Max threw his cap on his desk. "Well, we made it."

"Yes, sir. I was watching from the lounge."

"You don't seem surprised."

"Should I be, Captain?"

Max sprawled in his easy chair, stretching his weary back muscles. "You should be. Yes, sir, you should be."

"All right. I'm surprised."

Max looked up and scowled. "Dutch, where is this ship going now?"

Walther answered, "The Captain has not yet told me."

"Confound it! You know what I mean. Our schedule calls for Nova Terra. But there is Halcyon sitting right over there—a blind man could find it with a cane. What destination did you have in mind when you boosted me into command? Tell me what you expected then? Before you tagged me."

"I had in mind," Walther answered, "getting a captain for the *Asgard."*

"That's no answer. See here, the passengers have a stake in this. Sure, I had to take this risk for them, no choice. But now there is a choice. Shouldn't we tell them and let them vote on it?"

Walther shook his head emphatically. "You don't ask passengers anything, sir. Not in a ship underway. It is not fair to them to ask them. You *tell* them."

Max jumped up and strode the length of the cabin. "'Fair,' you say. Fair! It's not fair to *me."* He swung and faced Walther.

“Well? You’re not a passenger. You’re my First Officer. What do *you* think we should do?”

Walther stared him in the eye. “I can’t decide that for the Captain. That is why you are Captain.”

Max stood still and closed his eyes. The figures stood out clearly, in neat columns. He went to his phone and savagely punched the call for the control room. “Captain speaking. Is Kelly still there? Oh—good, Chief. We reposition for Nova Terra. Start work—I’ll be up in a minute.”

22
THE *TOMAHAWK*

Max liked this time of day, this time of year. He was lying in the grass on the little rise west of the barn, with his head propped up so that he could see to the northwest. If he kept his eyes there, on the exit ring of the C.S.&E. Ring Road, he would be able, any instant now, to see the *Tomahawk* plunge out and shoot across the gap in free trajectory. At the moment he was not reading, no work was pushing him, he was just being lazy and enjoying the summer evening.

A squirrel sat up nearby, stared at him, decided he was harmless and went about its business. A bird swooped past.

There was a breathless hush, then suddenly a silver projectile burst out of the exit ring, plunged across the draw and entered the ring on the far side—just as the sound hit him.

"Boy, oh boy!" he said softly. "It never looks like they'd make it."

It was all that he had climbed the rise to see, but he did not get up at once. Instead he pulled a letter from his pocket and reread the ending: " … I guess Daddy was glad to get me back in one piece because he finally relented. Putzie and I were married a week ago—and oh Max, I'm so *happy!* You must visit us the next time you hit dirt at Hespera." She had added, "P.S. Mr. Chips sends her love—and so do I."

Quite a gal, Ellie. She usually got her own way, one way or another. He felt a bit sorry for Putzie. Now if they had all stayed on Charity …

Never mind—an astrogator ought not to get married. Fondly, he fingered the sunburst on his chest. Too bad he had not been able to stay with the *Asgard*—but of course they were right; he could not ship as assistant in a ship where he had once been skipper. And assistant astrogator of the *Elizabeth Regina* was a good billet, too; everybody said the *Lizzie* was a taut ship.

Besides that, not every young A.A. had a new congruency to his credit, even now being surveyed. He had nothing to kick about. He didn't even mind the whopping big fine the Council of the Guilds had slapped on him, nor the official admonition that had been entered in his record. They had let him stay in space, which was the important thing, and the admonition

appeared right along with the official credit for the “Hendrix” congruency.

And, while he didn’t argue the justice of the punishment—he’d been in the wrong and he knew it—nevertheless the guilds were set up wrong; the rules ought to give everybody a chance. Someday he’d be senior enough to do a little politicking on that point.

In the meantime, if he didn’t get moving, he’d have to buy that taxi. Max got up and started down the slope. The helicab was parked in front of the house and the driver was standing near it looking out over the great raw gash of the Missouri-Arkansas Power Project. The fields Max once had worked were gone, the cut reached clear into the barn yard. The house was still standing but the door hung by one hinge and some kid had broken all the windows. Max looked at the house and wondered where Maw and the man she had married were now?—not that he really cared and no one around Clyde’s Corners seemed to know. They had told him at the courthouse that Maw had collected her half of the government-condemnation money and the pair of them had left town.

Probably their money was gone by now—Max’s half of the money was gone completely, it hadn’t quite paid his fine. If they were broke, maybe Montgomery was having to do some honest work, for Maw wasn’t the woman to let a man loaf when she was needing. The thought pleased Max; he felt he had a score to settle with Montgomery, but Maw was probably settling it for him.

The driver turned toward him. “Be a big thing when they get this finished. You ready to go, sir?”

Max took a last glance around. “Yes. I’m all through here.”

They climbed into the cabin. “Where to? Back to the Corners?”

Max thought about it. He really ought to save money—but shucks, he would save plenty this next trip. “No, fly me over to Springfield and drop me at the southbound ring road station. I’d like to make it in time to catch the *Javelin.”*

That would put him in Earthport before morning.

AFTERWORD
by Michael Z. Williamson

What is it about Heinlein's juveniles that keeps them relevant and selling sixty years after their first publication?

The massive astrogration computer described in this book could easily be replaced by a laptop, or even a palm-sized device these days, and wouldn't come close to the power we'd deem necessary. Nor would such calculations be done on paper, manually converted to binary, fed in, the results returned and then corrections applied by hand. The very nature of the problem presented makes it obvious, even to those of us not computer literate, that the entire system would be automated and redundant. The ship would be given its destination and allowed to find its own way. Any minor corrections would be applied by some kind of touchscreen, mouse or other interface, not a pair of wired buttons to apply binary impulses by something as slow as the human hand. We know this story is outdated from the woefully backward future tech, but a great many of us find it readable, and re-readable.

Obviously, then, that is not what this story is about.

Heinlein's juveniles are about young adults having to become adults. They are voyages of discovery not of alien planets, but of self.

Had RAH tried to write nonfiction books to that effect, of maturing and developing, it's almost certain they'd have wound up in the 5-cent bin and not even be a footnote today. If set as contemporary fiction, they might have done well, for a time. There are a few Newbery books that remain popular.

However, all of RAH's juveniles remain in, or return to print, year after year, to the tune of millions of total copies, and usually without the boost from being required reading in some high school English class. People don't read about Max because they have to, they read about him because they *want* to.

This is the sneaky approach to classic status: Be good.

So why is it good?

What hooked me in the 70s, about the time the Shuttle was launching with a much more sophisticated (for the time) computer system, was the breadth of the story, the vista. We live in a world almost bereft of frontiers to explore and challenge us, so we must create our own. Heinlein created some

for us, on distant worlds. The worlds in *Starman Jones* are a bit on the dark side. An impoverished rural region not much different from a half-century ago, or today, is eminently believable, and something we can still manage to empathize with. Most of us have been out of place in some fashion. Many of us have, when suddenly at a cultural event that is foreign to us.

Fortunately, few of us have been stranded on a planet of uncommunicative alien centauroids who tie people to trees to keep them out of the way, while enslaving humanoids as muscle power.

But, where does that line from the familiar to the alien lie? At what point was it not just believable, yet gripping? We accept the MacGuffin of Max's eidetic memory. As a veteran, I was even able to accept Sam doing a ten-mile sneak and peek, and exfiltration, with just a pistol. I'd at least have wanted some medical supplies, an MRE and a Camelbak (which by the way, bears a striking resemblance to something Heinlein described in *Tunnel in the Sky*, four decades before it was "invented.") A starship can feel like a cruise ship, something we're familiar with in concept. The star drive is something our physicists say is likely impossible, or maybe not. The ship's tech is a combination of laughably antiquated—its computers and navigation—and unbelievably advanced—its star drive and power—by modern standards. The planet they discover is conceivable but completely unprovable. There are numerous lines blurring the comfortably normal and the outrageous throughout the book. That gives us enough foothold. We can accept the outrageous while standing on known ground.

The key, as I've said, is the human story. Max is most definitely believable. He has an adolescence marred by all the usual issues, as well as a single-parent family a scheming step-father-to-be. That's more than most teens have, thankfully, but it dramatically makes the case. Once out in the world with little more than the clothes on his back, he is immediately in a world of politics and castes, evolved specifically to keep people like him in his place. In this, Heinlein prophetically foresaw the modern BMV, or perhaps the juggling act between "overqualified" and "no degree." Sophisticated societies can sometimes be more ritual-laden than the most primitive. In this story, the Guilds have their rules, the crew their customs, the officers their regulations, the wealthy passengers their expectations of wants being met, each planet its own culture …

If written as a contemporary today, many writers would want to toss Max into the sex trade, or at least make some statement about the Evils of Capitalism that created these Guilds … whoops, the Guilds sound too union. Better make them HR departments at some huge industrial concern contributing to global warming. Such a story would greatly annoy two categories of readers: those who disagreed with the politics, and those who agreed with the politics. Said book might sell within the space of a few months to the latter group, but wouldn't age well. It might inspire those who agreed to try to do something vague and meaningful, also to be forgotten as ephemera of a decade. Such a book might even be a bestseller, but would anyone care in 60 years? Unlikely.

The message in this book isn't about any particular time or place or cause. It's about courage, determination, self-exploration. It's about a young man becoming a man proper (or a young woman a woman, in some of Heinlein's works). Max has to pretend to be an adult, and then act like one. When offered a chance to pursue his dream, he accepts the challenge, even though it leaves him standing on the edge of an emotional cliff. There is a big difference between knowing about a subject and actually knowing the subject. His elders understand this, and encourage him along.

Before long, he's at a cusp where he must take charge of himself, and shortly thereafter, an entire ship. Nor is it really a choice. His only alternative is to fail, either physically or emotionally. He can pretend not to have vital knowledge locked in his mind that might—only might—save everyone, or he can curl up into a ball and twitch. He must step up and be a man, nervous and unsure. Once there, though, once he is sure, he accepts the transition and we leave him as he runs the ship competently.

I can't speak as much for the civilian world, but every veteran I know has been at that juncture. Even when you know you're capable, it is sobering, possibly terrifying. It's that way the first time, and frequently many times, because you really don't have a choice.

This story tells the reader that its okay to be in that position, to be alone, nervous and self-doubting. That when you reach that point, you have to take a breath and proceed. The outcome is unsure. However, the outcome for not proceeding is guaranteed failure. Had Max declined the challenge, he and his shipmates would die of old age, lost and forgotten, at worst

having fought it out with the centaurs and eventually succumbing to numbers.

Starman Jones also tells us it's a big, wide universe. Heck, it's a big world. The number of places I personally want to visit increases faster than I can possibly manage to schedule the trips, much less afford them. The number of places I'd rather not visit grows too, though I didn't exactly have a choice on some of them. Nor does Max. This is something else young adults need to learn in every generation. You can't, and won't always get what you want, and there are penalties tangible and intangible for trying to do so. Violating the rules or the law might have you end up fined or in jail. Some other violations might get you killed.

Max is a farm boy, from a farm outdated even in 1953, though quite a few still existed then. A very few still do, but only as rare anachronisms. Despite that, it sets the contrast nicely between the haves and have-nots. The background is of a culture with a clear division between them, and little chance to rise from one class to the other. Max's challenge is to do so, while learning how to navigate, not a ship, but cultures and personalities.

Ellie serves as a temptation for Max, though not sexually. We found out at the end that had Max pursued that concept (which would have violated a lot of publishing standards of the time), he'd have wound up in even worse straits. That's a very good lesson about the heat of young eagerness, and still fitting in our instant gratification world. Ellie doesn't grasp the difference in their cultural rules herself, and her status as a daughter of the ruling class means she doesn't need to. With a word, she could give Max lots of advantages, none of which would last beyond the voyage, and would in fact destroy any chance of a future for him. The lesson there is that we have to earn things. Anything given for free is worth only what you pay for it.

That's not all, though. There are simpler messages, too. Max doesn't quite know how to do a tactical analysis of a place—the locals, the culture, the environment. It's not like it was back in Arkansas. That's important, too. Gross insults in one culture can be compliments in another. In Arabic for example, the difference between a greeting to a lady and a sexual crudity is the accent on a single letter. For the Haicyon natives, praising someone's potential as lunch is a compliment. Robert A. Heinlein the sailor is telling the reader, "By the way, kid, when you get off the ship here, it ain't Arkansas."

As for resolving the current Problem Facing Mankind That Must Be Solved Now Or Our Precious Bodily Fluids Are At Stake du jour, Heinlein took the long view. This could be that the world was still unwrapping from Korea and WWII. He certainly tackled the big issue of the nuclear threat in other books. Instead, for this book he put it all in perspective.

"Someday, he'd be senior enough to do a little politicking on that point." Not every problem has to be solved right this moment, nor even within a given book or series, or in forty-two minutes plus commercials on the idiot box. Some issues are too large for an individual, and it really isn't kind to whip up that kind of hope in a fragile youth, only to toss them into the depths or jadedness or despair too soon, when they realize it's just not that easy in the real world. The first thing any juvenile has to do is *grow up*. That of itself is a massive undertaking in any society. One can't conquer the world until one has conquered oneself. Nuclear wars and oil crises and ice ages and global warming and pollution and overfishing and creeping socialism and growing oligarchic capitalism and fluoridated water can wait. First, just become the type of person you should be. That's what the world needs most of all.

That message is timeless. It's also important. And most of all, it's a message that young people of every age really want, and need, to hear.

That's why this book worked in 1953, for me in 1979, for my daughter in 2011, and will probably still work for many future generations.

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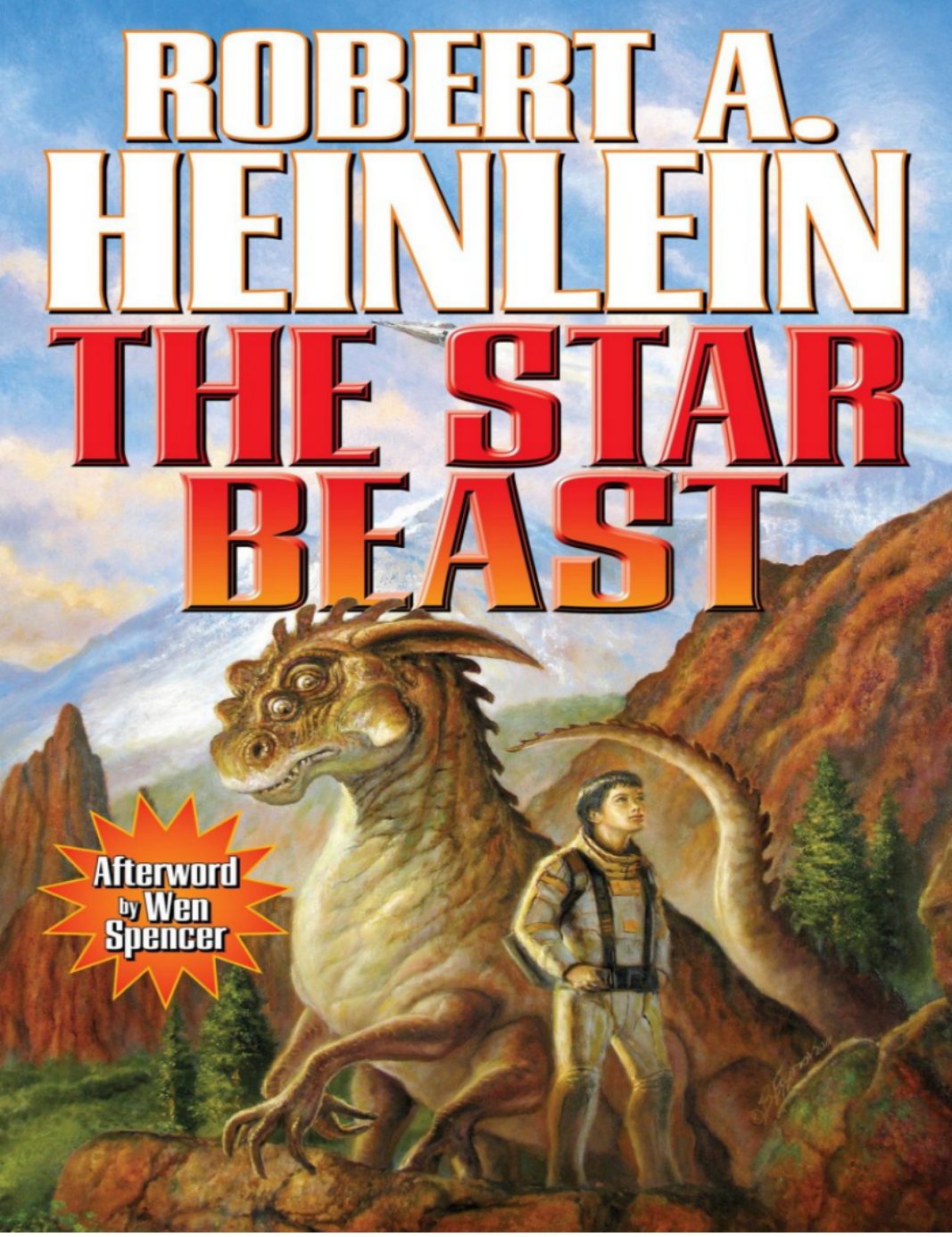
THE STAR BEAST

ROBERT A. HEINLEIN

THE STAR BEAST



The STAR BEAST

by Robert A. Heinlein

Jacket, title page, and endpapers
by CLIFFORD GEARY

Robert Heinlein's "space zoo" is unique—there is an unusual animal in each of his books. Lummox, whose story is told in this book, is an extraordinary creature that endears itself to us in the first chapters.

The creature is—we believe as we read—the pet of John Thomas Stuart XII—a good many years from now. At the end we discover Lummox has quite different ideas about the relationship. What is Lummox? It is some time before the reader really finds out.

Robert A. Heinlein

Robert Heinlein is one of the outstanding science-fiction writers of today, and his stories have appeared in many magazines and anthologies. Willy Ley has said of him: "In science-fiction circles it has become customary to use Robert A. Heinlein as the standard; unfortunately for most writers that standard is too high."

Heinlein wanted first to become an astronomer and this interest in stars persisted through his training at Annapolis and his service in the Navy. And now that he is writing science-fiction, the stars are in their proper places and his space flight formulas are mathematically correct.

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The STAR BEAST

by ROBERT A. HEINLEIN

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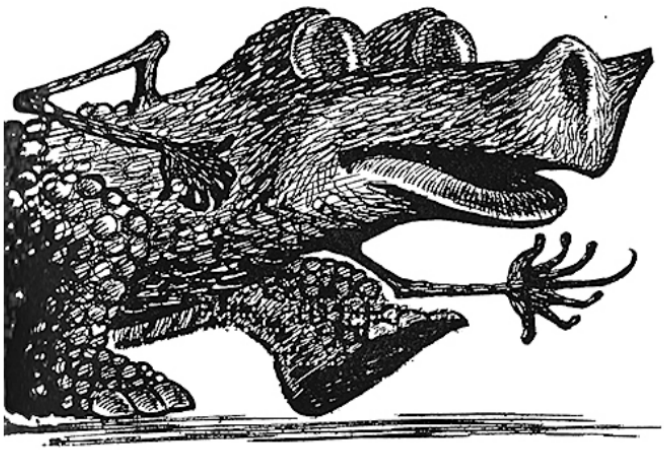

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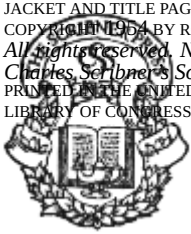

Some excerpts from this book were first published in *THe Magazine of Fantasy and Science-Fiction* under the title “Star Lummox.”

***For* DIANE *and* CLARK**

Contents

CHAPTER I

L-Day

LUMMOX was bored and hungry. The latter was a normal state; creatures of Lummox's breed were always ready for a little snack, even after a full meal. Being bored was less usual and derived directly from the fact that Lummox's chum and closest associate, John Thomas Stuart, had not been around all day, having chosen to go off somewhere with his friend Betty.

One afternoon was a mere nothing; Lummox could hold his breath that long. But he knew the signs and understood the situation; John Thomas had reached the size and age when he would spend more and more time with Betty, or others like her, and less and less time with Lummox. Then there would come a fairly long period during which John Thomas would spend practically no time with Lummox but at the end of which there would arrive a new John Thomas which would presently grow large enough to make an interesting playmate.

From experience Lummox recognized this cycle as necessary and inevitable; nevertheless the immediate prospect was excruciatingly boring. He lumbered listlessly around the back yard of the Stuart home, looking for anything—a grasshopper, a robin, anything at all that might be worth looking at. He watched a hill of ants for a while. They seemed to be moving house; an endless chain was dragging little white grubs in one direction while a countermarching line returned for more grubs. This killed a half hour.

Growing tired of ants, he moved away toward his own house. His number-seven foot came down on the ant hill and crushed it, but the fact did not come to his attention. His own house was just big enough for him to back into it and was the end building of a row of decreasing size; the one at the far end would have made a suitable doghouse for a chihuahua.

Piled outside his shed were six bales of hay. Lummox pulled a small amount off one bale and chewed it lazily. He did not take a second bite because he had taken as much as he thought he could steal and not have it noticed. There was nothing to stop him from eating the entire pile—except the knowledge that John Thomas would bawl him out bitterly and might even refuse for a week or more to scratch him with the garden rake. The household rules required Lummox not to touch food other than natural forage until it

was placed in his manager; Lummox usually obeyed as he hated dissension and was humiliated by disapproval.

Besides, he did not want hay. He had had hay for supper last night, he would have it again tonight, and again tomorrow night. Lummox wanted something with more body and a more interesting flavor. He ambled over to the low fence which separated the several acres of back yard from Mrs. Stuart's formal garden, stuck his head over and looked longingly at Mrs. Stuart's roses. The fence was merely a symbol marking the line he must not cross. Lummox had crossed it once, a few years earlier, and had sampled the rose bushes…just a sample, a mere appetizer, but Mrs. Stuart had made such a fuss that he hated to think about it even now. Shuddering at the recollection, he backed hastily away from the fence.

But he recalled some rose bushes that did not belong to Mrs. Stuart, and therefore in Lummox's opinion, did not belong to anybody. They were in the garden of the Donahues, next door west. There was a possible way, which Lummox had been thinking about lately, to reach these "ownerless" rose bushes.

The Stuart place was surrounded by a ten-foot concrete wall. Lummox had never tried to climb over it, although he had nibbled the top of it in places. In the rear there was one break in it, where the gully draining the land crossed the property line. The gap in the wall was filled by a massive grating of eight-by-eight timbers, bolted together with extremely heavy bolts. The vertical timbers were set in the stream bed and the contractor who had erected it had assured Mrs. Stuart that it would stop Lummox, or a herd of elephants, or anything else too big-hipped to crawl between the timbers.

Lummox knew that the contractor was mistaken, but his opinion had not been asked and he had not offered it. John Thomas had not expressed an opinion either, but he had seemed to suspect the truth; he had emphatically ordered Lummox not to tear the grating down.

Lummox had obeyed. He had sampled it for flavor, but the wooden timbers had been soaked in something which gave them a really unbearable taste; he let them be.

But Lummox felt no responsibility for natural forces. He had noticed, about three months back, that spring rains had eroded the gully so that two of the vertical timbers were no longer imbedded but were merely resting on the dry stream bed. Lummox had been thinking about this for several weeks and had found that a gentle nudge tended to spread the timbers at the bottom. A slightly heavier nudge might open up a space wide enough without actually tearing down the grating…

Lummox lumbered down to check up. Still more of the stream bed had washed away in the last rain; one of the vertical timbers hung a few inches free of the sand. The one next to it was barely resting on the ground. Lummox smiled like a simple-minded golliwog and carefully, delicately insinuated his head between the two big posts. He pushed gently.

Above his head came a sound of rending wood and the pressure suddenly relieved. Startled, Lummox pulled his head out and looked up. The upper end of one eight-by-eight had torn free of its bolts; it pivoted now on a lower horizontal girder. Lummox clucked to himself. Too bad…but it couldn't be helped. Lummox was not one to weep over past events; what has been, must be. No doubt John Thomas would be vexed…but in the meantime here was an opening through the grating. He lowered his head like a football linesman, set himself in low gear, and pushed on through. There followed several sounds of protesting and rending wood and sharper ones of broken bolts, but Lummox ignored it all; he was on the far side now, a free agent.

He paused and raised up like a caterpillar, lifting legs one and three, two and four, off the ground, and looked around. It was certainly nice to be outside; he wondered why he had not done it sooner. It had been a long time since John Thomas had taken him out, even for a short walk.

He was still looking around, sniffing free air, when an unfriendly character charged at him, yapping and barking furiously. Lummox recognized him, an oversized and heavily muscled mastiff that ran ownerless and free in the neighborhood; they had often exchanged insults through the grating. Lummox had nothing against dogs; in the course of his long career with the Stuart family he had known several socially and had found them pretty fair company in the absence of John Thomas. But this mastiff was another matter. He fancied himself boss of the neighborhood, bullied other dogs, terrorized cats, and repeatedly challenged Lummox to come out and fight like a dog.

Nevertheless Lummox smiled at him, opened his mouth wide and, in a lisping, baby-girl voice from somewhere far back inside him, called the mastiff a very bad name. The dog gasped. it is likely that he did not comprehend what Lummox had said, but he did know that he had been insulted. He recovered himself and renewed the attack, barking louder than ever and raising an unholy ruckus while dashing around Lummox and making swift sorties at his flanks to nip at Lummox's legs.

Lummox remained reared up, watching the dog but making no move. He did add to his earlier remark a truthful statement about the dog's ancestry and an untruthful one about his habits; they helped to keep the mastiff berserk. But on the dog's seventh round trip he cut fairly close to where Lummox's first pair of legs would have been had Lummox had all eight feet on the ground; Lummox ducked his head the way a frog strikes at a fly. His mouth opened like a wardrobe trunk and gobbled the mastiff.

Not bad, Lummox decided as he chewed and swallowed. Not bad at all…and the collar made a crunchy tidbit. He considered whether or not to go back through the grating, now that he had had a little snack, and pretend that he had never been outside at all. However,

there were still those ownerless rose bushes…and no doubt John Thomas would make it inconvenient for him to get out again soon. He ambled away parallel to the Stuart's rear wall, then swung around the end onto the Donahue land.

John Thomas Stuart XI got home shortly before dinner time, having already dropped Betty Sorensen at her home. He noticed, as he landed, that Lummox was not in sight, but he assumed that his pet was in his shed. His mind was not on Lummox, but on the age-old fact that females do not operate by logic, at least as logic is understood by males.

He was planning to enter Western Tech; Betty wanted them both to attend the state university. He had pointed out that he could not get the courses he wanted at State U.; Betty had insisted that he could and had looked up references to prove her point. He had rebutted by saying that it was not the name of a course that mattered, but who taught it. The discussion had fallen to pieces when she had refused to concede that he was an authority.

He had absent-mindedly unstrapped his harness copter, while dwelling on the illogic of the feminine mind, and was racking it in the hallway, when his mother burst into his presence. "John Thomas! *Where* have you been?"

He tried to think what he could have slipped on now. It was a bad sign when she called him "John Thomas"…"John" or "Johnnie" was okay, or even "Johnnie Boy." But "John Thomas" usually meant that he had been accused, tried, and convicted in absentia. "Huh? Why, I told you at lunch, Mum. Out hopping with Betty. We flew over to…"

"Never mind that! Do you know what *that beast* has done?"

Now he had it. Lummox. He hoped it wasn't Mum's garden. Maybe Lum had just knocked over his own house again. If so, Mum would level off presently. Maybe he had better build a new one, bigger. "What's the trouble?" he asked cautiously.

"'What's the trouble?' What isn't the trouble? John Thomas, this time you simply will have to get rid of it. This is the last straw."

"Take it easy, Mum," he said hastily. "We can't get rid of Lum. You promised Dad."

She made no direct answer. "With the police calling every ten minutes and that great dangerous beast rampaging around and…"

"*Huh?* Wait a minute, Mum, Lum isn't dangerous; he's gentle as a kitten. What happened?"

"Everything!"

He gradually drew out of her some of the details. Lummox had gone for a stroll; that much was clear. John Thomas hoped without conviction that Lummox had not got any iron or steel while he was out; iron had such an explosive effect on his metabolism. There was the time Lummox had eaten that second-hand Buick…

His thoughts were interrupted by his mother's words. "…and Mrs. Donahue is simply furious! And well she might be…her prize

roses."

Oh oh, that was bad. He tried to recall the exact amount in his savings account. He would have to apologize, too, and think of ways to butter up the old biddy. In the meantime he would beat Lummox's ears with an ax; Lummox knew about roses, there was no excuse.

"Look, Mum, I'm awfully sorry. I'll go right out and pound some sense into his thick head. When I get through with him, he won't dare sneeze without permission." John Thomas started edging around her.

"Where are you going?" she demanded.

"Huh? Out to talk with Lum, of course. When I get through with him…"

"Don't be silly. He isn't here."

"Huh? Where is he?" John Thomas swiftly rearranged his prayers to hope that Lummox hadn't found very much iron. The Buick hadn't really been Lummox's fault and anyhow it had belonged to John Thomas, but…

"No telling where he is now. Chief Dreiser said…"

"The *police* are after Lummox?"

"You can just bet they are, young man! The entire safety patrol is after him. Mr. Dreiser wanted me to come downtown and take him home, but I told him we would have to get you to handle that beast."

"But Mother, Lummox would have obeyed you. He always does. Why did Mr. Dreiser take him downtown? He knows Lum belongs here. Being taken downtown would frighten Lum. The poor baby is timid; he wouldn't like…"

"Poor baby indeed! He wasn't taken downtown."

"But you said he was."

"I said no such thing. If you'll be quiet, I'll tell you what happened."

It appeared that Mrs. Donahue had surprised Lummox when he had eaten only four or five of her rose bushes. With much courage and little sense she had run at him with a broom, to scream and belabor him about the head. She had not followed the mastiff, though he could have managed her with one gulp; Lummox had a sense of property as nice as that of any house cat. People were not food; in fact, people were almost invariably friendly.

So his feelings were hurt. He had lumbered away from there, pouting.

The next action report on Lummox was for a point two miles away and about thirty minutes later. The Stuarts lived in a suburban area of Westville; open country separated it from the main part of town. Mr. Ito had a small farm in this interval, where he hand-raised vegetables for the tables of gourmets. Mr. Ito apparently had not known what it was that he had found pulling up his cabbages and gulping them down. Lummox's long residence in the vicinity was certainly no secret, but Mr. Ito had no interest in other people's business and had never seen Lummox before.

But he showed no more hesitation than had Mrs. Donahue. He dashed into his house and came out with a gun that had been handed down to him from his grandfather—a relic of the Fourth World War of the sort known affectionately as a “tank killer.”

Mr. Ito steadied the gun on a potting bench and let Lummox have it where he would have sat down had Lummox been constructed for such. The noise scared Mr. Ito (he had never heard the weapon fired) and the flash momentarily blinded him. When he blinked his eyes and recovered, the thing had gone.

But it was easy to tell the direction in which it had gone. This encounter had not humiliated Lummox as had the brush with Mrs. Donahue; this frightened him almost out of his wits. While busy with his fresh green salad he had been faced toward a triplet of Mr. Ito’s greenhouses. When the explosion ticked him and the blast assailed his hearing, Lummox shifted into high gear and got underway in the direction he was heading. Ordinarily he used a leg firing order of 1,4,5,8,2,3,6,7 and repeat, good for speeds from a slow crawl to fast as a trotting horse; he now broke from a standing start into a double-ended gallop, moving legs 1 & 2 & 5 & 6 together, alternated with 3 & 4 & 7 & 8.

Lummox was through the three greenhouses before he had time to notice them, leaving a tunnel suitable for a medium truck. Straight ahead, three miles away, lay downtown Westville. It might have been better if he had been headed in the opposite direction toward the mountains.

John Thomas Stuart listened to his mother’s confused account with growing apprehension. When he heard about Mr. Ito’s greenhouses, he stopped thinking about his savings account and started wondering what assets he could convert into cash. His jump harness was almost new…but shucks! it wouldn’t pay the damage. He wondered if there was any kind of a dicker he could work with the bank? One sure thing: Mum wouldn’t help him out, not the state she was in.

Later reports were spotty. Lummox seemed to have gone across country until he hit the highway leading into town. A transcontinental trucker had complained to a traffic officer, over a cup of coffee, that he had just seen a robot pedatruck with no license plates and that the durned thing had been paying no attention to traffic lanes. But the trucker had used it as an excuse to launch a diatribe about the danger of robot drivers and how there was no substitute for a human driver, sitting in the cab and keeping his eyes open for emergencies. The traffic patrolman had not seen Lummox, being already at his coffee when Lummox passed, and had not been impressed since the trucker was obviously prejudiced. Nevertheless he had phoned in.

Traffic control center in Westville paid no attention to the report; control was fully occupied with a reign of terror.

John Thomas interrupted his mother. “Has anybody been hurt?”

“Hurt? I don’t know. Probably. John Thomas, you’ve got to get rid of that beast at once.”

He ignored that statement; it seemed the wrong time to argue it. “What else happened?”

Mrs. Stuart did not know in detail. Near the middle of town Lummox came down a local chute from the overhead freeway. He was moving slowly now and with hesitation; traffic and large numbers of people confused him. He stepped off the street onto a slidewalk. The walk ground to a stop, not being designed for six tons of concentrated load; fuses had blown, circuit breakers had opened, and pedestrian traffic at the busiest time of day was thrown into confusion for twenty blocks of the shopping district.

Women had screamed, children and dogs had added to the excitement, safety officers had tried to restore order, and poor Lummox, who had not meant any harm and had not intended to visit the shopping district anyway, made a perfectly natural mistake…the big display windows of the Bon Marché looked like a refuge where he could get away from it all. The duraglass of the windows was supposed to be unbreakable, but the architect had not counted on Lummox mistaking it for empty air. Lummox went in and tried to hide in a model bedroom display. He was not very successful.

John Thomas’s next question was cut short by a thump on the roof; someone had landed. He looked up. “You expecting anyone, Mum?”

“It’s probably the police. They said they would…”

“The police? Oh, my!”

“Don’t go away…you’ve got to see them.”

“I wasn’t going anywhere,” he answered miserably and punched a button to unlock the roof entrance.

Moments later the lazy lift from the roof creaked to a stop and the door opened; a safety sergeant and a patrolman stepped out. “Mrs. Stuart?” the sergeant began formally. “‘In your service, ma’am.’ We…” He caught sight of John Thomas, who was trying not to be noticed. “Are you John T. Stuart?”

John gulped. “Yessir.”

“Then come along, right away. ’Scuse us, ma’am. Or do you want to come too?”

“Me? Oh, no, I’d just be in the way.”

The sergeant nodded relieved agreement. “Yes, ma’am. Come along, youngster. Minutes count.” He took John by the arm.

John tried to shrug away. “Hey, what is this? You got a warrant or something?”

The police officer stopped, seemed to count ten, then said slowly, “Son, I do not have a warrant. But if you are the John T. Stuart I’m looking for…and I know you are…then unless you want something drastic and final to happen to that deep-space what-is-it you’ve been harboring, you’d better snap to and come with us.”

“Oh, I’ll come,” John said hastily.

"Okay. Don't give me any more trouble."

John Thomas Stuart kept quiet and went with him.

In the three minutes it took the patrol car to fly downtown John Thomas tried to find out the worst. "Uh, Mister Patrol Officer? There hasn't been anybody hurt? Has there?"

"Sergeant Mendoza," the sergeant answered. "I hope not. I don't know."

John considered this bleak answer. "Well… Lummox is still in the Bon Marché?"

"Is that what you call it?—Lummox? It doesn't seem strong enough. No, we got it out of there. It's under the West Arroyo viaduct… I hope."

The answer sounded ominous. "What do you mean: 'you hope'?"

"Well, first we blocked off Main and Hamilton, then we chivvied it out of the store with fire extinguishers. Nothing else seemed to bother it; solid slugs just bounced off. Say, what's that beast's hide made of? Ten-point steel?"

"Uh, not exactly." Sergeant Mendoza's satire was closer to fact than John Thomas cared to discuss; he still was wondering if Lummox had eaten any iron. After the mishap of the digested Buick Lummox's growth had taken an enormous spurt; in two weeks he had jumped from the size of a misshapen hippopotamus to his present unlikely dimensions, more growth than he had shown in the preceding generation. It had made him extremely gaunt, like a canvas tarpaulin draped over a scaffolding, his quite unearthly skeleton pushing through his skin; it had taken three years of a high-caloric diet to make him chubby again. Since that time John Thomas had tried to keep metal away from Lummox, most especially iron, even though his father and his grandfather had always fed him tidbits of scrap metal.

"Um. Anyhow the fire extinguishers dug him out—only he sneezed and knocked two men down. After that we used more fire extinguishers to turn him down Hamilton, meaning to herd him into open country where he couldn't do so much damage…seeing as how we couldn't find you. We were making out pretty well, with only an occasional lamp post knocked down, or ground car stepped on, or such, when we came to where we meant to turn him off on Hillcrest and head him back to your place. But he got away from us and headed out onto the viaduct, ran into the guard rail and went off, and…well, you'll see, right now. Here we are."

Half a dozen police cars were hovering over the end of the viaduct Surrounding the area were many private air cars and an air bus or two; the patrol cars were keeping them back from the scene. There were several hundred harness flyers as well, darting like bats in and out among the vehicles and making the police problem more difficult On the ground a few regular police, supplemented by emergency safety officers wearing arm bands, were trying to hold the crowd back and were diverting traffic away from the viaduct and

from the freight road that ran under it down the arroyo. Sergeant Mendoza's driver threaded his way through the cars in the air, while speaking into a hushophone on his chest. Chief Dreiser's bright red command car detached itself from the knot over the end of the viaduct and approached them.

Both cars stopped, a few yards apart and a hundred feet above the viaduct. John Thomas could see the big gap in the railing where Lummox had gone over, but could not see Lummox himself; the viaduct blocked his view. The door of the command car opened and Chief Dreiser leaned out; he looked harassed and his bald head was covered with sweat. "Tell the Stuart boy to stick his head out."

John Thomas ran a window down and did so. "Here, sir."

"Lad, can you control that monster?"

"Certainly, sir."

"I hope you're right. Mendoza! Land him. Let him try it."

"Yes, Chief." Mendoza spoke to the driver, who moved the car past the viaduct and started letting down beyond it. Lummox could be seen then; he had taken refuge under the end of the bridge, making himself small…for him. John Thomas leaned out and called to him.

"Lum! Lummie boy! Come to papa."

The creature stirred and the end of the viaduct stirred with him. About twelve feet of his front end emerged from under the structure and he looked around wildly.

"Here, Lum! Up here!"

Lummox caught sight of his friend and split his head in an idiot grin. Sergeant Mendoza snapped, "Put her down, Slats. Let's get this over."

The driver lowered a bit, then said anxiously, "That's enough, Sergeant. I saw that critter rear up earlier."

"All right, all right." Mendoza opened the door and kicked out a rope ladder used in rescue work. "Can you go down that, son?"

"Sure." With Mendoza to give him a hand John Thomas shinnied out of the door and got a grip on the ladder. He felt his way down and came to the point where there was no more ladder; he was still six feet above Lummox's head. He looked down. "Heads up, baby. Take me down."

Lummox lifted another pair of legs from the ground and carefully placed his broad skull under John Thomas, who stepped onto it, staggering a little and grabbing for a hand hold. Lummox lowered him gently to the ground.

John Thomas jumped off and turned to face him. Well, the fall apparently had not hurt Lum any; that was a relief. He would get him home first and then go over him inch by inch.

In the meantime Lummox was nuzzling his legs and making a sound remarkably like a purr. John looked stern. "*Bad* Lummie! Bad, bad Lummie…you're a mess, aren't you?"

Lummox looked embarrassed. He lowered his head to the

ground, looked up at his friend, and opened his mouth wide. “I didn’t *mean* to,” he protested in his baby-girl voice.

“You didn’t mean to. You didn’t *mean* to! Oh, no, you never do. I’m going to take your front feet and stuff them down your throat. You know that, don’t you? I’m going to beat you to a pulp and then use you for a rug. No supper for you. You didn’t mean to, indeed!”

The bright red car came close and hovered. “Okay?” demanded Chief Dreiser.

“Sure.”

“All right. Here’s the plan. I’m going to move that barrier up ahead. You get him back up on Hillcrest, going out the upper end of the draw. There will be an escort waiting; you fall in behind and stay with it all the way home. Get me?”

“Okay.” John Thomas saw that in both directions the arroyo road had been blocked with riot shields, tractors with heavy armor mounted on their fronts, so that a temporary barrier could be thrown across a street or square. Such equipment was standard for any city safety force since the Riots of ’91, but he could not recall that Westville had ever used them; he began to realize that the day that Lummox went to town would not soon be forgotten.

But he was happy that Lummox had been too timid to munch on those steel shields. He was beginning to hope that his pet had been too busy all afternoon to eat any ferrous metal. He turned back to him. “All right, get your ugly carcass out of that hole. We’re going home.”

Lummox complied eagerly; the viaduct again trembled as he brushed against it. “Make me a saddle.”

Lummox’s midsection slumped down a couple of feet. He thought about it very hard and his upper surface shaped itself into contours resembling a chair. “Hold still,” John Thomas ordered. “I don’t want any mashed fingers.” Lummox did so, quivering a little, and the young man scrambled up, grabbing at slip folds in Lummox’s durable hide. He sat himself like a rajah ready for a tiger hunt.

“All right. Slow march now, up the road. No, no! Gee around, you numskull. Uphill, not down.”

Docilely, Lummox turned and ambled away.

Two patrol ground cars led the way, two others brought up the rear. Chief Dreiser’s tomato-red runabout hung over them at a safe distance. John Thomas lounged back and spent the time composing first, what he was going to say to Lummox, and second, what he was going to say to his mother. The first speech was much easier; he kept going back and embellishing it with fresh adjectives whenever he found himself running into snags on the second.

They were halfway home when a single flier, hopping free in a copter harness, approached the little parade. The flier ignored the red warning light stabbing out from the police chiefs car and slanted straight down at the huge star beast. John Thomas thought that he

recognized Betty's slapdash style even before he could make out features; he was not mistaken. He caught her as she cut power.

Chief Dreiser slammed a window open and stuck his head out. He was in full flow when Betty interrupted him. "Why, Chief Dreiser! What a terrible way to talk!"

He stopped and took another look. "Is that Betty Sorenson?"

"Of course it is. And I must say, Chief, that after all the years you've taught Sunday School I never thought I would live to hear you use such language. If that is setting a good example, I think I'll…"

"Young lady, hold your tongue."

"Me? But you were the one who was using…"

"Quiet! I've had all I can take today. You get that suit to buzzing and hop out of here. This is official business. Now get out."

She glanced at John Thomas and winked, then set her face in cherubic innocence. "But, Chief, I can't."

"Huh? Why not?"

"I'm out of juice. This was an emergency landing."

"Betty, you quit fibbing to me."

"Me? Fibbing? Why, Deacon Dreiser!"

"I'll deacon you. If your tanks are dry, get down off that beast and walk home. He's dangerous."

"Lummie dangerous? Lummie wouldn't hurt a fly. And besides, do you want me to walk home alone? On a country road? When it's almost dark? I'm surprised at you."

Dreiser sputtered and closed the window. Betty wiggled out of her harness and settled back in the wider seat that Lummox had provided without being told. John Thomas looked at her. "Hi, Slugger."

"Hi, Knothead."

"I didn't know you knew the Chief."

"I know everybody. Now shut up. I've gotten here, with all speed and much inconvenience, as soon as I heard the newscast. You and Lummox between you could not manage to think your way out of this, even with Lummox doing most of the work—so I rallied around. Now give me the grisly details. Don't hold anything back from mama."

"Smart Alec."

"Don't waste time on compliments. This will probably be our only chance for a private word before they start worrying you, so you had better talk fast."

"Huh? What do you think you are? A lawyer?"

"I'm better than a lawyer, my mind is not cluttered with stale precedents. I can be creative about it."

"Well…" Actually he felt better now that Betty was present It was no longer just Lummox and himself against an unfriendly world. He poured out the story while she listened soberly.

"Anybody hurt?" she asked at last.

“I don’t think so. At least they didn’t mention it.”

“They would have.” She sat up straight. “Then we’ve got nothing to worry about.”

“What? With hundreds, maybe thousands, in damage? I’d like to know what you call trouble?”

“People getting hurt,” she answered. “Anything else can be managed. Maybe we’ll have Lummox go through bankruptcy.”

“Huh? That’s silly!”

“If you think that is silly, you’ve never been in a law court.”

“Have you?”

“Don’t change the subject. After all, Lummox was attacked with a deadly weapon.”

“It didn’t hurt him; it just singed him a little.”

“Beside the point. It undoubtedly caused him great mental anguish. I’m not sure he was responsible for anything that happened afterwards. Be quiet and let me think.”

“Do you mind if I think, too?”

“Not as long as I don’t hear the gears grind. Pipe down.”

The parade continued to the Stuart home in silence. Betty gave him one piece of advice as they stopped. “Admit nothing. *Nothing*. And don’t sign anything. Holler if you need me.”

Mrs. Stuart did not come out to meet them. Chief Dreiser inspected the gap in the grating with John Thomas, with Lummox hanging over their shoulders. The Chief watched in silence as John Thomas took a string and tied it across the opening.

“There! Now he can’t get out again.”

Dreiser pulled at his lip. “Son, are you all right in the head?”

“You don’t understand, sir. The grating wouldn’t stop him even if we did repair it…not if he wanted to get out. I don’t know anything that would. But that string will. Lummox!”

“Yes, Johnnie?”

“See that string?”

“Yes, Johnnie.”

“You bust that string and I’ll bust your silly head. Understand me?”

“Yes, Johnnie.”

“You won’t go out of the yard again, not ever, unless I take you.”

“All right, Johnnie.”

“Promise? Cross your heart?”

“Cross my heart.”

“He hasn’t really got a heart,” Johnnie went on. “He has an uncentralized circulatory system. It’s like…”

“I don’t care if he has rotary pumps, as long as he stays home.”

“He will. He’s never broken ‘Cross my heart,’ even if he hasn’t got one.”

Dreiser chewed his thumb. “All right. I’ll leave a man out here with a portophone tonight. And tomorrow we’ll put some steel I-beams in there in place of that wood.”

John started to say, “Oh, not steel,” but he thought better of it. Dreiser said, “What’s the matter?”

“Uh, nothing.”

“You keep an eye on him, too.”

“He won’t get out”

“He had better not. You realize that you are both under arrest, don’t you? But I’ve got no way to lock that monstrosity up.”

John Thomas did not answer. He had not realized it; now he saw that it was inevitable. Dreiser went on in a kindly voice, “Try not to worry about it. You seem like a good boy and everybody thought well of your father. Now I’ve got to go in and have a word with your mother. You had better stay here until my man arrives…and then maybe sort of introduce him to, uh, this thing.” He passed a doubtful eye over Lummox.

John Thomas stayed while the police chief went back to the house. Now was the time to give Lummox what for, but he did not have the heart for it. Not just then.

CHAPTER II

The Department of Spatial Affairs

TO John Thomas Stuart XI the troubles of himself and Lummox seemed unique and unbearable, yet he was not alone, even around Westville. Little Mr. Ito was suffering from an always fatal disease—old age. It would kill him soon. Behind uncounted closed doors in Westville other persons suffered silently the countless forms of quiet desperation which can close in on a man, or woman, for reasons of money, family, health, or face.

Farther away, in the state capital, the Governor stared hopelessly at a stack of papers—evidence that would certainly send to prison his oldest and most trusted friend. Much farther away, on Mars, a prospector abandoned his wrecked sandmobile and got ready to attempt the long trek back to Outpost. He would never make it.

Incredibly farther away, twenty-seven light years, the Starship *Bolivar* was entering an interspatial transition. A flaw in a tiny relay would cause that relay to operate a tenth of a second later than it should. The S.S. *Bolivar* would wander between the stars for many years…but she would never find her way home.

Inconceivably farther from Earth, half way across the local star cloud, a race of arboreal crustaceans was slowly losing to a younger, more aggressive race of amphibians. It would be several thousands Earth years before the crustaceans were extinct, but the issue was not in doubt. This was regrettable (by human standards) for the crustacean race had mental and spiritual abilities which complemented human traits in a fashion which could have permitted a wealth of civilized cooperation with them. But when the first Earth-humans landed there, some eleven thousand years in the future, the crustaceans would be long dead.

Back on Earth at Federation Capital His Excellency the Right Honorable Henry Gladstone Kiku, M.A. (Oxon,) Litt.D. *honoris causa* (Capetown), O.B.E., Permanent Under Secretary for Spatial Affairs, was not worried about the doomed crustaceans because he would never know of them. He was not yet worried about S.S. *Bolivar* but he would be. Aside from the ship, the loss of one passenger in that ship would cause a chain reaction of headaches for Mr. Kiku and all his associates for years to come.

Anything and everything outside Earth's ionosphere was Mr. Kiku's responsibility and worry. Anything which concerned the relationships between Earth and any part of the explored universe

was also his responsibility. Even affairs which were superficially strictly Earthside were also his concern, if they affected or were in any way affected by anything which was extra-terrestrial, interplanetary, or interstellar in nature—a very wide range indeed.

His problems included such things as the importation of Martian sand grass, suitably mutated, for the Tibetan plateau. Mr. Kiku's office had not approved that until after a careful mathematical examination of the possible effect on the Australian sheep industry—and a dozen other factors. Such things were done cautiously, with the gruesome example of Madagascar and the Martian berryroot always before them. Economic decisions did not upset Mr. Kiku, no matter how many toes he stepped on; other sorts kept him awake nights—such as his decision not to give police escorts to Goddard exchange students from Procyon VII despite the very real danger to them from provincial Earthmen with prejudices against beings having unearthly arrangements of limbs or eyes or such—the cephalopods of that planet were a touchy people and something very like a police escort was their own usual punishment for criminals.

Mr. Kiku had an extremely large staff to help him, of course, and, also of course, the help of the Secretary himself. The Secretary made speeches, greeted Very Important Visitors, gave out interviews, and in many other ways eased for Mr. Kiku an otherwise unbearable load—Mr. Kiku would be first to admit this. As long as the current Secretary behaved himself, minded his business, took care of public appearances, and let the Under Secretary get on with the department's work, he had Mr. Kiku's approval. Of course, if he failed to pull his load or threw his weight around, Mr. Kiku was capable of finding ways to get rid of him. But it had been fifteen years since he had found it necessary to be so drastic; even the rawest political appointee could usually be broken to harness.

Mr. Kiku had not made up his mind about the current Secretary, but was not now thinking about him. Instead he was looking over the top-sheet synopsis for Project Cerberus, a power proposal for the research station on Pluto. A reminder light on his desk flashed and he looked up to see the door between his office and that of the Secretary dilate. The Secretary walked in, whistling *Take Me Out to the Ball Game*; Mr. Kiku did not recognize the tune.

He broke off. "Greetings, Henry. No, don't get up."

Mr. Kiku had not started to get up. "How do you do, Mr. Secretary? What can I do for your"

"Nothing much, nothing much." He paused by Mr. Kiku's desk and picked up the project folder. "What are you swotting now? Cerberus, eh? Henry, that's an engineering matter. Why should we worry about it?"

"There are aspects," Mr. Kiku answered carefully, "that concern us."

"I suppose so. Budget and so forth." His eye sought the bold-faced line reading: ESTIMATED COST: 3.5 megabucks and 7.4 lives.

“What’s this? I can’t go before the Council and ask them to approve this. It’s fantastic.”

“The first estimate,” Mr. Kiku said evenly, “was over eight megabucks and more than a hundred lives.”

“I don’t mind the money, but this other… You are in effect asking the Council to sign death warrants for seven and four-tenths men: You can’t do that, it isn’t human. Say, what the deuce is four-tenths of a man anyway? How can you kill a fraction of a man?”

“Mr. Secretary,” his subordinate answered patiently, “any project bigger than a schoolyard swing involves probable loss of life. But that hazard factor is low; it means that working on Project Cerberus will be safer, on the average, than staying Earthside. That’s my rule of thumb.”

“Eh?” The Secretary looked again at the synopsis. “Then why not say so? Put the thing in the best light and so forth?”

“This report is for my eyes…for our eyes, only. The report to the Council will emphasize safety precautions and will not include an estimate of deaths—which, after all, is a guess.”

“Mmm, ‘a guess.’ Yes, of course.” The Secretary put the report down, seemed to lose interest.

“Anything else, sir?”

“Oh, yes! Henry, old man, you know that Rargyllian dignitary I am supposed to receive today? Dr. What’s-his-name?”

“Dr. Ftaeml.” Mr. Kiku glanced at his desk control panel. “Your appointment is, uh, an hour and seven minutes from now.”

“That’s just it. I’m afraid I’ll have to ask you to substitute. Apologies to him and so forth. Tell him I’m tied up with affairs of state.”

“Sir? I wouldn’t advise that. He will expect to be received by an official of your rank…and the Rargyllians are extremely meticulous about protocol.”

“Oh, come now, this native won’t know the difference.”

“But he will, sir.”

“Well, let him think that you’re me… I don’t care. But I won’t be here and that’s that The Secretary General has invited me to go to the ball game with him—and an invitation from the S. G. is a ‘must,’ y’know.”

Mr. Kiku knew that it was nothing of the sort, had the commitment been explained. But he shut up. “Very well, sir.”

“Thanks, old chap.” The Secretary left, again whistling.

When the door closed, Mr. Kiku with an angry gesture slapped a row of switches on the desk panel He was locked in now and could not be reached by phone, video, tube, autowriter, or any other means, save by an alarm button which his own secretary had used only once in twelve years. He leaned elbows on his desk, covered his head with his hands and rubbed his fingers through his woolly pate.

This trouble, that trouble, the other trouble…and always some moron to jiggle his elbow! Why had he ever left Africa? Where

came this itch for public service? An itch that had long, since turned into mere habit…

He sat up and opened his middle drawer. It was bulging with real estate prospectuses from Kenya; he took out a handful and soon was comparing relative merits of farms. Now here was a little honey, if a man had the price—better than eight hundred acres, half of it in cultivation, and seven proved wells on the property. He looked at map and photographs and presently felt better. After a while he put them away and closed the drawer.

He was forced to admit that, while what he had told the chief was true, his own nervous reaction came mostly from his life-long fear of snakes. If Dr. Ftaeml were anything but a Rargyllian…or if the Rargyllians had not been medusa humanoids, he wouldn't have minded. Of course, he knew that those tentacles growing out of a Rargyllian's head were *not* snakes—but his stomach didn't know it. He would have to find time for a hypnotic treatment before—no, there wasn't time; he'd have to take a pill instead.

Sighing, he flipped the switches back on. His incoming basket started to fill up at once and all the communication instruments showed lights. But the lights were amber rather than blinking red; he ignored them and glanced through the stuff falling into his basket. Most of the items were for his information only: under doctrine his subordinates or their subordinates had taken action. Occasionally he would check a name and a suggested action and drop the sheet in the gaping mouth of the outgoing basket.

A radiotype came in that was not routine, in that it concerned a creature alleged to be extra-terrestrial but unclassified as to type and origin. The incident involved seemed unimportant—some nonsense in one of the native villages in the western part of the continent. But the factor of an extra-terrestrial creature automatically required the local police to report it to Spatial Affairs, and the lack of classification of the e.-t. prevented action under doctrine and resulted in the report being kicked upstairs.

Mr. Kiku had never seen Lummox and would have had no special interest if he had. But Mr. Kiku knew that each contact with "Out There" was unique. The universe was limitless in its variety. To assume without knowledge, to reason by analogy, to take the unknown for granted, all meant to invite disaster.

Mr. Kiku looked over his list to see whom he could send. Any of his career officers could act as a court of original and superior jurisdiction in any case involving extra-terrestrials, but who was on Earth and free? Hmm…

Sergei Greenberg, that was the man. System Trade Intelligence could get along without a chief for a day or two. He flipped a switch. "Sergei?"

"Yes, boss?"

"Busy?"

"Well, yes and no. I'm paring my nails and trying to figure a

reason why the taxpayers should pay me more money."

"Should they, now? I'm sending a bluesheet down." Mr. Kiku checked Greenberg's name on the radiotype, dropped it in his outgoing basket, waited a few seconds until he saw Greenberg pick it out of his own incoming basket. "Read it."

Greenberg did so, then looked up. "Well, boss?"

"Phone the local justice that we are assuming tentative jurisdiction, then buzz out and look into it."

"Thy wish is my command, O King. Even money the critter is terrestrial after all, two to one I can identify if it isn't."

"No wager, not at those odds. You're probably right. But it might be a 'special situation'; we can't take chances."

"I'll keep the local yokels in line, boss. Where is this hamlet? Westville? Or whatever it is?"

"How would I know? You have the sheet in front of you."

Greenberg glanced at it. "Hey! What do you know? It's in the mountains…this may take two or three weeks, boss. Hot enough for you?"

"Take more than three days and I'll charge it off your annual leave." Mr. Kiku switched off and turned to other matters. He disposed of a dozen calls, found the bottom of his incoming basket and lost it again, then noticed that it was time for the Rargyllian. Goose flesh crawled over him and he dug hastily into his desk for one of the special pills his doctor had warned him not to take too frequently. He had just gulped it when his secretary's light started blinking.

"Sir? Dr. Ftaeml is here."

"Show him in." Mr. Kiku muttered in a language his ancestors had used in making magic—against snakes, for example. As the door dilated he hung on his face the expression suitable for receiving visitors.

CHAPTER III

"—An Improper Question"

THE intervention by the Department of Spatial Affairs in the case of Lummox did not postpone the hearing; it speeded it up. Mr. Greenberg phoned the district judge, asked for the use of his courtroom, and asked him to have all parties and witnesses in court at ten o'clock the next morning—including, of course, the extra-terrestrial that was the center of the fuss. Judge O'Farrell questioned the last point.

"This creature…you need him, too?"

Greenberg said that he most decidedly wanted the e.-t. present, since his connection with the case was the reason for intervention. "Judge, we people in DepSpace don't like to butt into your local affairs. After I've had a look at the creature and have asked half a dozen questions, I can probably bow out…which will suit us both. This alleged e.-t. is my only reason for coming out. So have the beastie present, will you?"

"Eh, he's rather too large to bring into the courtroom. I haven't seen him for several years and I understand he has grown a bit…but he would have been too large to bring indoors even then. Couldn't you look at him where he is?"

"Possibly, though I admit to a prejudice for having everything pertinent to a hearing in one spot. Where is he?"

"Penned up where he lives, with his owner. They have a suburban place a few miles out"

Greenberg thought about it. Although a modest man, one who cared not where he ate or slept, when it came to DepSpace business he operated on the rule of making the other fellow do the running around; otherwise the department's tremendous load of business would never get done. "I would like to avoid that trip out into the country, as I intend to hold my ship and get back to Capital tomorrow afternoon, if possible. It's rather urgent…a matter of the Martian treaty." This last was Greenberg's standard fib when he wanted to hurry someone not in the department.

Judge O'Farrell said that he would arrange it. "We'll rig a temporary pen on the lawn outside the courthouse."

"Swell! See you tomorrow, Judge. Thanks for everything."

Judge O'Farrell had been on a fishing trip two days earlier when Lummox had gone for his walk. The damage had been cleaned up by his return and, as a fixed principle, he avoided hearing or reading

news reports or chitchat concerning cases he might have to try. When he phoned Chief-of-Safety Dreiser he expected no difficulty about moving Lummox.

Chief Dreiser went through the roof. "Judge, are you out of your head?"

"Eh? What's ailing you, Deacon?"

Dreiser tried to explain; the judge shrugged off his objections. Whereupon they both phoned the mayor. But the mayor had been on the same fishing trip; he threw his weight on O'Farrell's side. His words were: "Chief, I'm surprised at you. We can't have an important Federation official thinking that our little city is so backwoods that we can't handle a small thing like that." Dreiser groaned and called the Mountain States Steel & Welding Works.

Chief Dreiser decided to move Lummox before daylight, as he wished to get him penned up before the streets were crowded. But nobody had thought to notify John Thomas; he was awakened at four in the morning with a sickening shock; the wakening had interrupted a nightmare, he believed at first that something dreadful had happened to Lummox.

Once the situation was clear he was non-cooperative; he was a "slow starter," one of those individuals with a low morning blood-sugar count who is worth nothing until after a hearty breakfast—which he now insisted on.

Chief Dreiser looked angry. Mrs. Stuart looked mother-knows-best and said, "Now, dear, don't you think you had better…"

"I'm going to have my breakfast. And Lummox, too."

Dreiser said, "Young man, you don't have the right attitude. First thing you know you'll be in eyen worse trouble. Come along. You can get breakfast downtown."

John Thomas looked stubborn. His mother said sharply, "John Thomas! I won't have it, do you hear? You're being difficult, just like your father was."

The reference to his father rubbed him even more the wrong way. He said bitterly, "Why don't you stand up for me, Mum? They taught me in school that a citizen can't be snatched out of his home any time a policeman gets a notion. But you seem anxious to help *him* instead of *me*. Whose side are you on?"

She stared at him, astounded, as he had a long record of docile obedience. "John Thomas! You can't speak to your mother that way!"

"Yes," agreed Dreiser. "Be polite to your mother, or I'll give you the back of my hand—unofficially, of course. If there is one thing I can't abide it's a boy who is rude to his elders." He unbuttoned his tunic, pulled out a folded paper. "Sergeant Mendoza told me about the quibble you pulled the other day…so I came prepared. There's my warrant. Now, will you come? Or will I drag you?"

He stood there, slapping the paper against his palm, but did not

offer it to John Thomas. But when John Thomas reached for it, he let him have it and waited while he read it. At last Dreiser said, “Well? Are you satisfied?”

“This is a court order,” John Thomas said, “telling me to appear and requiring me to bring Lummox.”

“It certainly is.”

“But it says ten o’clock. It doesn’t say I can’t eat breakfast first… as long as I’m there by ten.”

The Chief took a deep breath, expanding visibly. His face, already pink, got red, but he did not answer.

John Thomas said, “Mum? I’m going to fix my breakfast. Shall I fix some for you, too?”

She glanced at Dreiser, then back at her son and bit her lip. “Never mind,” she said grudgingly. “I’ll get breakfast. Mr. Dreiser, will you have coffee with us?”

“Eh? That’s kind of you, ma’am. I don’t mind if I do. I’ve been up all night.”

John Thomas looked at them. “I’ll run out and take a quick look at Lummox.” He hesitated, then added, “I’m sorry I was rude, Mum.”

“We’ll say no more about it, then,” she answered coldly.

He had been intending to say several things, in self-justification, but he thought better of it and left. Lummox was snoring gently, stretched half in and half out of his house. His sentry eye was raised above his neck, as it always was when he was asleep; it swiveled around at John Thomas’s approach and looked him over, but that portion of Lummox that stood guard for the rest recognized the youth; the star creature did not wake. Satisfied, John Thomas went back inside.

The atmosphere mellowed during breakfast; by the time John Thomas had two dishes of oatmeal, scrambled eggs and toast, and a pint of cocoa inside him, he was ready to concede that Chief Dreiser had been doing his duty and probably didn’t kick dogs for pleasure. In turn, the Chief, under the influence of food, had decided that there was nothing wrong with the boy that a firm hand and an occasional thrashing would not cure…too bad his mother had to raise him alone; she seemed like a fine woman. He pursued a bit of egg with toast, captured it, and said, “I feel better, Mrs. Stuart, I really do. It’s a treat to a widower to taste homecooking…but I won’t dare tell my men.”

Mrs. Stuart put a hand to her mouth. “Oh, I forgot about them!” She added, “I can have more coffee in a moment. How many are there?”

“Five. But don’t bother, ma’am; they’ll get breakfast when they go off duty.” He turned to John Thomas. “Ready to go, young fellow?”

“Uh…” He turned to his mother. “Why not fix breakfast for them, Mum? I’ve still got to wake Lummox and feed him.”

By the time Lummox had been wakened and fed and had had matters explained to him, by the time five patrolmen had each enjoyed a second cup of coffee after a hot meal, the feeling was more that of a social event than an arrest. It was long past seven before the procession was on the road.

It was nine o'clock before they got Lummox backed into the temporary cage outside the courthouse. Lummox had been delighted by the smell of steel and had wanted to stop and nibble it; John Thomas was forced to be firm. He went inside with Lummox and petted him and talked to him while the door was welded shut. He had been worried when he saw the massive steel cage, for he had never got around to telling Chief Dreiser that steel was less than useless against Lummox.

Now it seemed too late, especially as the Chief was proud of the pen. There had been no time to pour a foundation, so the Chief had ordered an open-work box of steel girders, top, bottom, and sides, with one end left open until Lummox could be shut in.

Well, thought John Thomas, they all knew so much and they didn't bother to ask me. He decided simply to warn Lummox not to eat a bite of the cage, under dire threats of punishment…and hope for the best.

Lummox was inclined to argue; from his point of view it was as silly as attempting to pen a hungry boy by stacking pies around him. One of the workmen paused, lowered his welding torch and said, "You know, it sounded just like that critter was talking."

"He was," John Thomas answered briefly.

"Oh." The man looked at Lummox, then went back to work. Human speech on the part of extra-terrestrials was no novelty, especially on stereo programs; the man seemed satisfied. But shortly he paused again. "I don't hold with animals talking," he announced. John Thomas did not answer; it did not seem to be a remark to which an answer could be made.

Now that he had time John Thomas was anxious to examine something on Lummox which had been worrying him. He had first noticed the symptoms on the morning following Lummox's disastrous stroll-two swellings located where Lummox's shoulders would have been had he been so equipped. Yesterday they had seemed larger, which disturbed him, for he had hoped that they were just bruises…not that Lummox bruised easily.

But they fretted him. It seemed possible that Lummox had hurt himself during the accidental gymkhana he had taken part in. The shot that Mr. Ito had taken at him had not damaged him; there had been a slight powder burn where the explosive charge had struck him but that was all; a charge that would destroy a tank was to Lummox about like a hearty kick to a mule…startling, but not harmful.

Lummox might have bruised himself in plunging through the greenhouses, but that seemed unlikely. More probably he had been hurt in falling off the viaduct. John Thomas knew that such a fall

would kill any Earth animal big enough to have an unfavorable cube-square ratio, such as an elephant. Of course Lummox, with his unearthly body chemistry, was not nearly as fragile as an elephant… still, he might have bruised himself badly.

Dog take it! the swellings were bigger than ever, real tumors now, and the hide over them seemed softer and thinner, not quite the armor that encased Lummox elsewhere. John Thomas wondered if a person like Lummox could get cancer, say from a bruise? He did not know and he did not know anyone who would. Lummox had never been ill as far back as John Thomas could remember, nor had his father ever mentioned Lummox having anything wrong with him. Lummox was the same today, yesterday, and always—except that he kept getting bigger.

He would have to look over his grandfather's diary tonight and his great grandfather's notes. Maybe he had missed something…

He pressed one of the swellings, trying to dig his fingers in; Lummox stirred restlessly. John Thomas stopped and said anxiously, "Does that hurt?"

"No," the childish voice answered, "it *tickles*."

The answer did not reassure him. He knew that Lummox was ticklish, but it usually took something like a pickaxe to accomplish it. The swellings must be very sensitive. He was about to investigate farther when he was hailed from behind.

"John! Johnnie!"

He turned. Betty Sorenson was outside the cage. "Hi, Slugger," he called to her. "You got my message?"

"Yes, but not until after eight o'clock. You know the dorm rules. Hi, Lummox. How's my baby?"

"Fine," said Lummox.

"That's why I recorded," John Thomas answered. "The idiots rousted me out of bed before daylight. Silly."

"Do you good to see a sunrise. But what is all this rush? I thought the hearing was next week?"

"It was supposed to be. But some heavyweight from the Department of Space is coming out from Capital. He's going to try it,"

"*What?*"

"What's the matter?"

"The matter? Why, everything! I don't know this man from Capital. I thought I was going to deal with Judge O'Farrell… I know what makes him tick. This new judge…well, I don't know. In the second place, I've got ideas I haven't had time to work out yet." She frowned. "We'll have to get a postponement."

"What for?" asked John Thomas. "Why don't we just go into court and tell the truth?"

"Johnnie, you're hopeless. If that was all there was to it, there wouldn't be any courts."

"Maybe that would be an improvement."

“But… Look, Knothead, don’t stand there making silly noises. If we have to appear in less than an hour…” She glanced up at the clock tower on the ancient courthouse. “A good deal less. We’ve got to move fast. At the very least, we’ve got to get that homestead claim recorded.”

“That’s silly. They won’t take it, I tell you. We can’t homestead Lummox. He’s not a piece of land.”

“A man can homestead a cow, two horses, a dozen pigs. A carpenter can homestead his tools. An actress can homestead her wardrobe.”

“But that’s not ‘homesteading.’ I took the same course in commercial law that you did. They’ll laugh at you.”

“Don’t quibble. It’s section II of the same law. If you were exhibiting Lummie in a carnival, he’d be the ‘tools of your trade,’ wouldn’t he? It’s up to them to prove he isn’t. The thing is to register Lummox as exempt from lien before somebody gets a judgment against you.”

“If they can’t collect from me, they’ll collect from my mother.”

“No, they won’t. I checked that. Since your father put the money in a trust, legally she hasn’t got a dime.”

“Is that the law?” he asked doubtfully.

“Oh, hurry up! The law is whatever you can convince a court it is.”

“Betty, you’ve got a twisted mind.” He slid out between the bars, turned and said, “Lummie, I’ll only be gone a minute. You stay right here.”

“Why?” asked Lummox.

“Never mind ‘why.’ You wait for me here.”

“All right.”

There was a crowd on the courthouse lawn, people gawking at Lummox in his new notoriety. Chief Dreiser had ordered rope barriers erected and a couple of his men were present to see that they were respected, The two young people ducked under the ropes and pushed through the crowd to the courthouse steps. The county clerk’s office was on the second floor; there they found his chief deputy, an elderly maiden lady.

Miss Schreiber took the same view of registering Lummox as free from judgment that John Thomas did. But Betty pointed out that it was not up to the county clerk to decide what was an eligible chattel under the law, and cited an entirely fictitious case about a man who homesteaded a multiple echo. Miss Schreiber reluctantly filled out forms, accepted the modest fee, and gave them a certified copy.

It was almost ten o’clock. John Thomas hurried out and started downstairs. He stopped when he saw that Betty had paused at a penny weighing machine. “Come on, Betty,” he demanded. “This is no time for that.”

“I’m not weighing myself,” she answered while staring into the

mirror attached to it. “I’m checking my makeup. I’ve got to look my best.”

“You look all right.”

“Why, Johnnie, a compliment!”

“It wasn’t a compliment. Hurry up. I’ve got to tell Lummox something.”

“Throttle back and hold at ten thousand. I’ll bring you in.” She wiped off her eyebrows, painted them back in the smart Madame Satan pattern, and decided that it made her look older. She considered adding a rolling-dice design on her right cheek, but skipped it as Johnnie was about to boil over. They hurried down and outdoors.

More moments were wasted convincing a policeman that they belonged inside the barrier. Johnnie saw that two men were standing by Lummox’s cage. He broke into a run. “Hey! You two! Get away from there!”

Judge O’Farrell turned around and blinked. “What is your interest, young man?” The other man turned but said nothing.

“Me? Why, I’m his owner. He’s not used to strangers. So go back of the rope, will you?” He turned to Lummox. “It’s all right, baby. Johnnie’s here.”

“Howdy, Judge.”

“Oh. Hello, Betty.” The judge looked at her as if trying to decide why she was present, then turned to John Thomas. “You must be the Stuart boy. I’m Judge O’Farrell.”

“Oh. Excuse me, Judge,” John Thomas answered, his ears turning pink. “I thought you were a sightseer.”

“A natural error. Mr. Greenberg, this is the Stuart boy… John Thomas Stuart. Young man, this is the Honorable Sergei Greenberg, Special Commissioner for the Department of Spatial Affairs.” He looked around. “Oh yes…this is Miss Betty Sorenson, Mr. Commissioner. Betty, why have you done those silly things to your face?”

She ignored him with dignity. “Honored to meet you, Mr. Commissioner.”

“Just ‘Mr. Greenberg,’ please, Miss Sorenson.” Greenberg turned to Johnnie. “Any relation to *the* John Thomas Stuart?”

“I’m John Thomas Stuart the Eleventh,” Johnnie answered simply. “I suppose you mean my great-great-great grandfather.”

“I guess that would be it. I was born on Mars, almost within sight of his statue. I had no idea your family was mixed up in this. Perhaps we can have a gab about Martian history later.”

“I’ve never been to Mars,” Johnnie admitted.

“No? That’s surprising. But you’re young yet.”

Betty listened, ears almost twitching, and decided that this judge, if that was what he was, would be an even softer mark than Judge O’Farrell. It was hard to remember that Johnnie’s name meant anything special…especially since it didn’t. Not around Westville.

Greenberg went on, “You’ve made me lose two bets, Mr. Stuart.”

“Sir?”

“I thought this creature would prove not to be from ‘Out There.’ I was wrong; that big fellow is certainly not native to Earth. But I was equally sure that, if he was e.-t., I could attribute him, I’m not an exotic zoologist, but in my business one has to keep skimming such things…look at the pictures at least. But I’m stumped. What is be and where did he come from?”

“Uh, why, he’s just Lummox. That’s what we call him. My great grandfather brought him back in the *Trail Blazer*…her second trip.”

“That, long ago, eh? Well, that clears up some of the mystery; that was before DepSpace kept records…in fact before there was such a department. But I still don’t see how this fellow could have missed making a splash in the history books. I’ve read about the *Trail Blazer* and I remember she brought back many exotica. But I don’t remember this fellow…and, after all, extra-terrestrials were news in those days.”

“Oh, that… Well, sir, the captain didn’t know Lummox was aboard. Great-granddad brought him aboard in his jump bag and sneaked him off the ship the same way.”

“In his *jump bag?*” Greenberg stared at Lummox’s out-sized figure.

“Yes, sir. Of course Lummie was smaller then.”

“So I am forced to believe.”

“I’ve got pictures of him. He was about the size of a collie pup. More legs of course.”

“Mmmm, yes. More legs. And he puts me, more in mind of a triceratops than a collie. Isn’t he expensive to feed?”

“Oh, no, Lummie eats anything. Well, almost anything,” John Thomas amended hastily, glancing self-consciously at the steel bars. “Or he can go without eating for a long time. Can’t you, Lummie?”

Lummox had been lying with his legs retracted, exhibiting the timeless patience which he could muster when necessary. He was listening to his chum and Mr. Greenberg while keeping an eye on Betty and the judge. He now opened his enormous mouth. “Yes, but I don’t like it.”

Mr. Greenberg raised his eyebrows and said, “I hadn’t realized that he was a speech-center type.”

“A what? Oh, sure. Lummie’s been talking since my father was a boy; he just sort of picked it up. I meant to introduce you. Here, Lummie… I want you to meet Mr. Commissioner Greenberg.”

Lummox looked at Greenberg without interest and said, “How do you do, Mr. Commissioner Greenberg,” saying the formula phrase clearly but not doing so well on the name and title.

“Uh, how do you do, Lummox.” He was staring at Lummox when the courthouse clock sounded the hour. Judge O’Farrell turned and spoke to him.

“Ten o’clock, Mr. Commissioner. I suppose we had better get

started."

"No hurry," Greenberg answered absent-mindedly, "since the party can't start until we get there. I'm interested in this line of investigation. Mr. Stuart, what is Lummox's R.I.Q. on the human scale?"

"Huh? Oh, his relative intelligence quotient. I don't know, sir."

"Good gracious, hasn't anyone ever tried to find out?"

"Well, no, sir… I mean 'yes, sir.' Somebody did run some tests on him back in my grandfather's time, but granddad got so sore over the way they were treating Lummie that he chucked them out. Since then we've kept strangers away from Lummie, mostly. But he's real bright. Try him."

Judge O'Farrell whispered to Greenberg, "The brute isn't as bright as a good bird dog, even if he can parrot human speech a little. I know."

John Thomas said indignantly, "I heard that, Judge. You're just prejudiced!"

The judge started to answer but Betty cut across him. "Johnnie! You know what I told you… I'll do the talking."

Greenberg ignored the interruption. "Has any attempt been made to learn his language?"

"Sir?"

"Mmm, apparently not. And he may have been brought here before he was old enough to talk…his own language I mean. But he must have had one; it's a truism among xenists that speech centers are found only in nervous systems that use them. That is to say, he could not have learned human speech as speech even poorly, unless his own breed used oral communication. Can he write?"

"How could he, sir? He doesn't have hands."

"Mmm, yes. Well, taking a running jump with the aid of theory, I'll bet on a relative score of less than 40, then. Xenologists have found that high types, equivalent to humans, always have three characteristics: speech centers, manipulation, and from these two, record keeping. So we can assume that Lummox's breed was left at the post. Studied any xenology?"

"Not much, sir," John Thomas admitted shyly, "except books I could find in the library. But I mean to major in xenology and exotic biology in college."

"Good for you. It's a wide open field. You'd be surprised how difficult it is to hire enough xenists just for DepSpace. But my reason for asking was this: as you know, the department has intervened in this case. Because of *him*." Greenberg gestured at Lummox. "There was a chance that your pet might be of a race having treaty rights with us. Once or twice, strange as it may seem, a foreigner visiting this planet has been mistaken for a wild animal, with…shall we say 'unfortunate' results?" Greenberg frowned, recalling the terrible hushed-up occasion when a member of the official family of the Ambassador from Llador had been found, dead and stuffed-in a

curiosity shop in the Virgin Islands. “But no such hazard exists here.”

“Oh. I guess not, sir. Lummox is…well, he’s just a member of our family.”

“Precisely.” The Commissioner spoke to Judge O’Farrell. “May I consult you a moment, Judge? Privately?”

“Certainly, sir.”

The men moved, away; Betty joined John Thomas. “It’s a cinch,” she whispered, “if you can keep from making more breaks.”

“What did I do?” he protested. “And what makes you think it’s going to be easy?”

“It’s obvious. He likes you, he likes Lummox.”

“I don’t see how that pays for the ground floor of the Bon Marché. Or all those lamp posts.”

“Just keep your blood pressure down and follow my lead. Before we are through, they’ll be paying us. You’ll see.”

A short distance away Mr. Greenberg was saying to Judge O’Farrell, “Judge, from what I have learned it seems to me that the Department of Spatial Affairs should withdraw from this case.”

“Eh? I don’t follow you, sir.”

“Let me explain. What I would like to do is to postpone the hearing twenty-four hours while I have my conclusions checked by the department. Then I can withdraw and let the local authorities handle it. Meaning you, of course.”

Judge O’Farrell pursed his lips. “I don’t like last-minute postponements, Mr. Commissioner. It has always seemed unfair to me to order busy people to gather together, to their expense and personal inconvenience, then tell them to come back another day. It doesn’t have the flavor of justice.”

Greenberg frowned. “True. Let me see if we can arrive at it another way. From what young Stuart tells me I am certain that this ease is not one calling for intervention under the Federation’s xenic policies, even though the center of interest is extra-terrestrial and therefore a legal cause for intervention if needed. Although the department has the power, that power is exercised only when necessary to avoid trouble with governments of other planets. Earth has hundreds of thousands of e.-t. animals; it has better than thirty thousand non-human xenians, either residents or visitors, having legal status under treaties as ‘human’ even though they are obviously non-human. Xenophobia being what it is, particularly in our cultural backwaters…no, I wasn’t referring to Westville! Human nature-being what it is, each of those foreigners is a potential source of trouble in our foreign relations.

“Forgive me for saying what you already know; it is a necessary foundation. The department can’t go around wiping the noses of all our xenic visitors…even those that have noses. We haven’t the personnel and certainly not the inclination. If one of them gets into trouble, it is usually sufficient to advise the local magistrate of our

treaty obligations to the xenian's home planet. In rare cases the department intervenes. This, in my opinion, is not such a case. In the first place it seems that our friend Lummox here is an 'animal' under the law and…"

"Was there doubt?" the judge asked in astonishment.

"There might have been. That's why I am here. But, despite his limited ability to talk, his other limitations would keep such a breed from rising to a level where we could accept it as civilized; therefore he is an animal. Therefore he has only the usual rights of animals under our humane laws. Therefore the department need not concern itself."

"I see. Well, no one is going to be cruel to him, not in my court."

"Certainly. But for another quite sufficient reason the department is not interested. Let us suppose that this creature is 'human' in the sense that law and custom and treaty have attached to that word since we first made contact with the Great Race of Mars. He is not, but suppose it."

"Stipulated." agreed Judge O'Farrell.

"We stipulate it. Nevertheless he cannot be a concern of the department because… Judge, do you know the history of the *Trail Blazer?*"

"Vaguely, from grammar school days. I'm not a student of spatial exploration. Our own Earth is confusing enough."

"Isn't it, though? Well, the *Trail Blazer* made three of the first interspatial transition flights, when such flights were as reckless as the voyage Columbus attempted. They did not know where they were going and they had only hazy notions about how to get back… in fact the *Trail Blazer* never came back from her third trip."

"Yes, yes. I remember."

"The point is, young Stuart—I can't call him by his full name; it doesn't seem right—Stuart tells me that this loutish creature with the silly smile is a souvenir of the *Trail Blazer*'s second cruise. That's all I need to know. We have no treaties with any of the planets she visited, no trade, no intercourse of any sort. Legally they don't exist. Therefore the only laws that apply to Lummox are our own domestic laws; therefore the department should not intervene—and even if it did, a special master such as myself would be obliged to rule entirely by domestic law. Which you are better qualified to do than I."

Judge O'Farrell nodded. "Well, I have no objection to resuming jurisdiction. Shall we go in?"

"Just a moment. I suggested a delay because this case has curious features. I wanted to refer back to the department to make sure that my theory is correct and that I have not missed some important precedent or law. But I am willing to withdraw at once if you can assure me of one thing. This creature… I understand that, despite its mild appearance, it turned out to be destructive, even dangerous?"

O'Farrell nodded. "So I understand…unofficially of course."

"Well, has there been any demand that it be destroyed?"

“Well,” the judge answered slowly, “again unofficially, I know that such a demand will be made. It has come to my attention privately that our chief of police intends to ask the court to order the animal’s destruction as a public safety measure. I anticipate prayers from private sources as well.”

Mr. Greenberg looked worried. “As bad as that? Well, Judge, what is your attitude? If you try the case, are you going to let the animal be destroyed?”

Judge O’Farrell retorted, “Sir, that is an improper question.”

Greenberg turned red. “I beg your pardon. But I must get at it in some fashion. You realize that this specimen is unique? Regardless of what it has done, or how dangerous it may be (though I’m switched if I’m convinced of *that*), nevertheless its interest to science is such that it should be preserved. Can’t you assure me that you will not order it destroyed?”

“Young man, you are urging me to prejudge a case, or a portion of a case. Your attitude is most improper!”

Chief Dreiser chose this bad time to come hurrying up. “Judge, rye been looking all over for you. Is this hearing going to take place? I’ve got seven men who…”

O’Farrell interrupted him. “Chief, this is Mr. Commissioner Greenberg. Mr. Commissioner, our Chief of Safety.”

“Honored, Chief.”

“Howdy, Mr. Commissioner. Gentlemen, about this hearing. I’d like to know…”

“Chief,” the judge interrupted brusquely, “just tell my bailiff to hold things in readiness. Now leave us in private, if you please.”

“But…” The chief shut up and backed away, while muttering something excusable in a harassed policeman. O’Farrell turned back to Greenberg.

The Commissioner had had time during the interruption to recall that he was supposed to be without personal emotions. He said smoothly, “I withdraw the question, Judge. I had no intention of committing an impropriety.” He grinned. “Under other circumstances I might have found myself slapped for contempt, eh?”

O’Farrell grudged a smile. “It is possible.”

“Do you have a nice jail? I have over seven months leave saved up and no chance to take it.”

“You shouldn’t overwork, young man. I always find time to fish, no matter how full the docket. ‘Allah does not subtract from man’s allotted time those hours spent in fishing.’”

“That’s a good sentiment. But I still have a problem. You know that I could insist on postponement while I consult the department?”

“Certainly. Perhaps you should. Your decision should not be affected by my opinions.”

“No. But I agree with you; last-minute postponements are vexations.” He was thinking that to refer to the department, in this odd case, meant to consult Mr. Kiku…and he could hear the Under

Secretary making disgusted remarks about “initiative” and “responsibility” and “for heaven’s sake, couldn’t anyone else around this madhouse make a simple decision?” Greenberg made up his mind. “I think it is best for the department to continue intervention. I’ll take it, at least through a preliminary hearing.”

O’Farrell smiled broadly. “I had hoped that you would. I’m looking forward to hearing you. I understand that you gentlemen from the Department of Spatial Affairs sometimes hand out an unusual brand of law.”

“Really? I hope not. I mean to be a credit to Harvard Law.”

“Harvard? Why, so am I! Do they still shout for Reinhardt?”

“They did when I was there.”

“Well, well, it’s a small world! I hate to wish this case on a schoolmate; I’m afraid it is going to be a hot potato.”

“Aren’t they all? Well, let’s start the fireworks. Why don’t we sit *en banc*? You’ll probably have to finish.”

They started back to the courthouse. Chief Dreiser, who had been fuming some distance away, saw that Judge O’Farrell had forgotten him. He started to follow, then noted that the Stuart boy and Betty Sorenson were still on the other side of Lummox’s cage. They had their heads together and did not notice that the two magistrates were leaving. Dreiser strode over to them.

“Hey! Inside with you, Johnnie Stuart! You were supposed to be in court twenty minutes ago.”

John Thomas looked startled. “But I thought…” he began, then noticed that the judge and Mr. Greenberg had gone. “Oh! Just a minute, Mr. Dreiser… I’ve got something to say to Lummox.”

“You’ve got nothing to say to that beast now. Come along.”

“But, Chief…”

Mr. Dreiser grabbed his arm and started to move away. Since he outweighed John Thomas by nearly one hundred pounds Johnnie moved with him. Betty interrupted with, “Deacon Dreiser! What a nasty way to behave!”

“That’ll be enough out of you, young lady,” Dreiser answered. He continued toward the courthouse with John Thomas in tow. Betty shut up and followed. She considered tripping the police chief, but decided not to.

John Thomas gave in to the inevitable. He had intended to impress on Lummox, at the very last minute, the necessity of remaining quiet, staying put, and not eating the steel bars. But Mr. Dreiser would not listen. It seemed to John that most of the older people in the world spent much of their time not listening.

Lummox had not missed their exit. He stood up, filling the enclosed space, and stared after John Thomas, while wondering what to do. The bars creaked as he brushed against them. Betty looked back and said, “Lummox! You wait there! We’ll be back.”

Lummox remained standing, staring after them and thinking about it. An order from Betty wasn’t really an order. Or was it?

There were precedents in the past to think over.

Presently he lay down again.

CHAPTER IV

The Prisoner at the Bars

AS O'Farrell and Greenberg entered the room the bailiff shouted, "Order in the court!" The babble died down and spectators tried to find seats. A young man wearing a hat and hung about with paraphernalia stepped into the path of the two officials. "Hold it!" he said and photographed them. "One more…and give us a smile, Judge, like the Commissioner had just said something funny."

"One is enough. And take off that hat." O'Farrell brushed past him. The man shrugged but did not take off his hat.

The clerk of the court looked up as they approached. His face was red and sweaty, and he had his tools spread out on the justice's bench. "Sorry, Judge," he said. "Half a moment." He bent over a microphone and intoned, "Testing…one, two, three, four… Cincinnati…sixty-six." He looked up. "I've had more grief with this recording system today."

"You should have checked it earlier."

"So help me, Judge, if you can find anybody… Never mind. I did check it, it was running sweet. Then when I switched it on at ten minutes to ten, a transistor quit and it's been an endless job to locate the trouble."

"All right," O'Farrell answered testily, annoyed that it should happen in the presence of a distinguished visitor. "Get my bench clear of your implements, will you?"

Greenberg said hastily, "If it's all the same to you, I won't use the bench. We'll gather around a big table, court-martial style. I find it speeds things up."

O'Farrell looked unhappy. "I have always maintained the ancient formalities in this court. I find it worthwhile."

"Very likely. I suppose that those of us who have to try cases anywhere and everywhere get into sloppy habits. But we can't help it. Take Minatare for example; suppose you attempted, out of politeness, to conform to their customs in trying a case. They don't think a judge is worth a hoot unless he undergoes a cleansing fast before he mounts the judge's sphere…then he has to stay up there without food or drink until he reaches a decision. Frankly, I couldn't take it. Could you?"

Judge O'Farrell felt annoyed that this glib young man should imply that there could be a parallel between the seemly rituals of his court and such heathen practices. He recalled uneasily the three

stacks of wheat cakes, adorned with sausage and eggs, with which he had started the day. “Well…‘other times, other customs,’” he said grudgingly.

“Exactly. And thanks for indulging me.” Greenberg motioned to the bailiff; the two started shoving attorneys’ tables together to make one big one before O’Farrell could make clear that he had quoted the old saw for the purpose of rebutting it. Shortly, about fifteen people were seated around the composite table and Greenberg had sent the bailiff out to find ash trays. He turned to the clerk, who was now at his control desk, wearing earphones and crouching over his instruments in the awkward pose of all electronics technicians. “Is your equipment working now?”

The clerk pressed a thumb and forefinger together. “Rolling.”

“Very well. Court’s in session.”

The clerk spoke into his mike, announcing time, date, place, nature and jurisdiction of the court, and the name and title of the special master presiding, reading the last and mispronouncing Sergei Greenberg’s first name; Greenberg did not correct him. The bailiff came in, his hands full of ash trays, and said hastily, “Oyez! Oyez! Let all who have business before this court gather nigh and…”

“Never mind,” Greenberg interrupted. “Thanks anyhow. This court will now hold a preliminary hearing on any and all issues relating to the actions last Monday of an extra-terrestrial creature locally resident and known as ‘Lummox.’ I refer to that big brute in a cage outside this building. Bailiff, go get a picture of him, please, and insert it in the record.”

“Right away, your honor.”

“The court wishes to announce that this hearing may be converted to a final determination on any or all issues at any time, if the court so announces and subject to objection and ruling at the time. In other words, don’t hold your fire; this may be your only day in court. Oh yes…the court will receive petitions relating to this extra-terrestrial as well as hear issues.”

“Question, your honor.”

“Yes?”

“May it please the court: my client and I have no objection if all that we are engaged in is a preliminary inquiry. But will we return to accepted procedures if we go on to terminer?”

“This court, being convened by the Federation and acting in accordance with the body of law called ‘Customs of Civilizations’ in brief and consisting of agreements, treaties, precedents, et cetera, between two or more planets of the Federation, or with other civilizations with which member planets of the Federation have diplomatic relations, is not bound by local procedures. It is the purpose of this court to arrive at the truth and, from there, to reach equity…equity under the Law. The court will not trample on local law and custom except where they are hopelessly opposed to superior law. But where local custom is merely ritualistic, this court

will ignore formality and get on with its business. Understand me?"

"Er, I believe so, sir. I may take exception later." The small, middle-aged man who spoke seemed embarrassed.

"Any one may object at any time for any reason and be heard. Also you may appeal from my decisions. However…" Greenberg grinned warmly."… I doubt if it will do you much good. So far I have been pretty lucky in having my decisions upheld."

"I did not intend to imply," the man answered stiffly, "that the court was not properly…"

"Sure, sure! Let's get on with it." Greenberg picked up a stack of papers. "Here is a civil action. 'Bon Marché Merchandising Corporation versus 'Lummox,' John Thomas Stuart XI…" ("*That name still bothers me*," he said in an aside to Judge O'Farrell.) "… Marie Brandley Stuart, et al., and another one like it for the Western Mutual Assurance Company, insurers of Bon Marché. Here is another, same defendants, brought by K. Ito and his insurance company, um, New World Casualty, Ltd., and one from the City of Westville, same defendants again…and still another brought by Mrs. Isabelle Donahue. Also some criminal matters…one is for harboring a dangerous animal, one for felonious harboring of same, another for negligence and another for maintaining a public nuisance."

John Thomas had been steadily turning white. Greenberg glanced at him and said, "They haven't skipped much, have they, son? Cheer up…the condemned man always eats a hearty breakfast." John Thomas managed a sickly grin. Betty found his knee under the table and patted it.

There was another paper in the stack; Greenberg shuffled it in with the others without reading it into the record. It was a petition signed by the Chief-of-Safety on behalf of the City of Westville praying the court to order the destruction of a dangerous animal known as "Lummox" and further identified as, etc. Instead Greenberg looked up and said, "Now who's who? You, sir?"

The man addressed was the lawyer who had questioned the court's methods; he identified himself as Alfred Schneider and stated that he was acting both for Western Mutual and for the Bon Marché. "This gentleman beside me is Mr. deGrasse, manager of the store."

"Good. Now the next man, please." Greenberg established that all principals were present, with their attorneys; the roster included, besides himself, Judge O'Farrell, John Thomas, Betty, and Chief Dreiser, the following: Mrs. Donahue and her lawyer Mr. Beanfield, Messrs. Schneider and deGrasse for Bon Marché, Mr. Lombard, city attorney of Westville, the attorney for Mr. Ito's insurance company and Mr. Ito's son (acting for his father), Officers Karnes and Mendoza (witnesses), and John Thomas's mother with the Stuart family lawyer, Mr. Postle.

Greenberg said to Postle, "I take it you are also acting for Mr. Stuart."

Betty interrupted with, "Heavens, no! I'm representing Johnnie."

Greenberg raised his eyebrows. “I was about to ask what you were doing here. Uh, you are an attorney?”

“Well… I’m his counsel.”

O’Farrell leaned over and whispered, “This is preposterous, Mr. Commissioner. Of course she is not a lawyer. I know the child. I’m rather fond of her…but frankly, I don’t think she is quite bright.” He added severely, “Betty, you have no business here. Get out and quit making a fool of yourself.”

“Now, see here, Judge…”

“One moment, young lady,” Greenberg put in. “Do you have any qualifications to act as counsel for Mr. Stuart?”

“I certainly do. I’m the counsel he wants.”

“Mmm, a very strong point. Though perhaps not sufficient.” He spoke to John Thomas. “Is that correct?”

“Uh, yes. sir.”

Judge O’Farrell whispered, “Don’t do it, son! You’ll be reversed.”

Greenberg whispered back, “That’s what I am afraid of.” He frowned, then spoke to Mr. Postle. “Are you prepared to act for both mother and son?”

“Yes.”

“*No!*” Betty contradicted.

“Eh? Wouldn’t Mr. Stuart’s interests be better protected in the hands of an attorney than in yours? No, don’t answer; I want Mr. Stuart to answer.”

John Thomas turned pink and managed to mutter, “I don’t want him.”

“Why?”

John Thomas looked stubborn. Betty said scornfully, “Because his mother doesn’t like Lummox, that’s why. And…”

“That’s not true!” Mrs. Stuart cut in sharply.

“It is true…and that old fossil Postle is stringing along with her. They want to get rid of Lummie, both of them!”

O’Farrell coughed in his handkerchief. Postle turned red. Greenberg said gravely, “Young lady, you will stand and apologize to Mr. Postle.”

Betty looked at the Commissioner, dropped her eyes and stood up. She said humbly, “Mr. Postle, I’m sorry you’re a fossil. I mean I’m sorry I said you were a fossil.”

“Sit down,” Greenberg said soberly. “Mind your manners hereafter. Mr. Stuart, no one is required to accept counsel not of his choice. But you place me in a dilemma. Legally you are a minor child; you have chosen as counsel another minor child. It won’t look well in the record.” He pulled at his chin. “Could it be that you…or your counsel…or both of you…are trying to cause a mistrial?”

“Uh, no, sir.” Betty looked smugly virtuous; it was a possibility she had counted on but had not mentioned to Johnnie.

“Hmm…”

"Your honor…"

"Yes, Mr. Lombard?"

"This strikes me as ridiculous. This girl has no standing. She is not a member of the bar; obviously she can't function as an attorney. I dislike finding myself in the position of instructing the court but the obvious thing to do is to put her outside the bar and appoint counsel. May I suggest that the Public Defender is present and prepared?"

"You may so suggest. Is that all, Mr. City Attorney?"

"Uh, yes, your honor."

"May I say that the court also finds it distasteful for you to instruct the court; you will not do so again."

"Er…yes, your honor."

"This court will, make its own mistakes in its own way. Under the customs by which this court is convened it is not necessary that a counsel be qualified formally…in your idiom, be a 'member of the bar,' a licensed lawyer. If you find that rule unusual, let me assure you that the hereditary lawyer-priests of Deflai find it much more astonishing. But it is the only rule which can be applied everywhere. Nevertheless I thank you for your suggestion. Will the Public Defender stand up?"

"Here, your honor. Cyrus Andrews."

"Thank you. Are you prepared to act?"

"Yes. I'll need a recess to consult with my principal."

"Naturally. Well, Mr. Stuart? Shall the court appoint Mr. Andrews as your counsel? Or associate counsel?"

"No!" Again Betty answered.

"I was addressing Mr. Stuart, Miss Sorenson. Well?"

John Thomas glanced at Betty. "No, your honor."

"Why not?"

"I'll answer that," Betty put in. "I talk faster than he does; that's why I'm counsel. We won't take Mr. Andrews because the City Attorney is against us on one of these silly things they've got about Lummox…and the City Attorney and Mr. Andrews are law partners when they are not fighting sham battles in court!"

Greenberg turned to Andrews. "Is that correct, sir?"

"Why, yes, we're law partners, your honor. You will understand that, in a town this size…"

"I quite understand. I also understand Miss Sorenson's objection. Thank you, Mr. Andrews. Stand down."

"Mr. Greenberg?"

"What is it now, young lady?"

"I can get you part way off the spot. You see, I had a dirty hunch that some busybody would try to keep me out of it. So we fixed it up ahead of time. I'm half owner."

"Half owner?"

"Of Lummox. See?" She took a paper from her bag and offered it. "A bill of sale, all legal and proper. At least it ought to be, I coped it out of the book."

Greenberg studied it. “The form appears correct. The date is yesterday…which would make you voluntarily liable to the extent of your interest, from a civil standpoint. It would not affect criminal matters of earlier date.”

“Oh, pooh! There aren’t any criminal matters.”

“That remains to be determined. And don’t say ‘pooh’; it is not a legal term The question here is whether or not the signer can vend this interest. Who owns Lummox?”

“Why, Johnnie does! It was in his father’s will.”

“So? Is that stipulated, Mr. Postle?”

Mr. Postle whispered with Mrs. Stuart, then answered, “So stipulated, your honor. This creature called ‘Lummox’ is a chattel of John Thomas Stuart, a minor child. Mrs. Stuart’s interest is through her son.”

“Very well.” Greenberg handed the bill of sale to the clerk. “Read it into the record.”

Betty settled back. “All right, your honor…appoint anybody you want to. Just as long as I can have my say.”

Greenberg sighed. “Would it make any difference if I did?”

“Not much, I guess.”

“Let the record show that you two, having been duly warned and advised, persist in acting as your own counsel. The court regretfully assumes the burden of protecting your rights and advising you as to the law.”

“Oh, don’t feel bad, Mr. Greenberg. We trust you.”

“I’d rather you didn’t,” he said dryly. “But let’s move on. That gentleman down at the end…who are you?”

“Me, Judge? I’m the Galactic Press stringer around here. Name of Hovey.”

“So? The clerk will supply a transcript for the press. I’ll be available for the usual interview later, if anyone wants it. No pictures of me with this creature Lummox, however. Are there any more gentlemen of the press?”

Two others stood up. “The bailiff will place chairs for you just beyond the rail.”

“Yes, Judge. But first…”

“Outside the rail, please.” Greenberg looked around. “I think that’s all…no, that gentleman down there. Your name, sir?”

The man addressed stood up. He was dressed in formal jacket and striped gray shorts and held himself with self-conscious dignity. “May it please the court, my name, sir, is T. Omar Esklund, Doctor of Philosophy.”

“It neither pleases nor displeases the court, Doctor. Are you a party to any of these issues?”

“I am, sir. I appear here as *amicus curiae*, a friend of the court.”

Greenberg frowned. “This court insists on choosing its own friends. State your business, Doctor.”

“Sir, if you will permit me. I am state executive secretary of the

Keep Earth Human League." Greenberg suppressed a groan but Esklund did not notice as he had looked down to pick up a large manuscript. "As is well known, ever since the inception of the ungodly practice of space travel, our native Earth, given to us by Divine law, has been increasingly overrun by creatures…'beasts' rather let us say…of dubious origin. The pestilential consequences of this unholy traffic are seen on every…"

"Doctor Esklund!"

"Sir?"

"What is your business with this court? Are you a principal to any of the issues before it?"

"Well, not in so many words, your honor. In a broader sense, I am advocate for all mankind. The society of which I have the honor…"

"Do you have *any* business? A petition, perhaps?"

"Yes," Esklund answered sullenly, "I have a petition."

"Produce it."

Esklund fumbled among his papers, drew out one; it was passed to Greenberg, who did not look at it. "Now state briefly, for the record, the nature of your petition. Speak clearly and toward the nearest microphone."

"Well…may it please the court: the society of which I have the honor of being an officer…a league, if I may so say, embracing all mankind, prays…nay, *demands* that this unearthly beast which has already ravaged this fair community be destroyed. Such destruction is sanctioned and, yes, commanded by those sacred—"

"Is that your petition? You want this court to order the destruction of the e.-t. known as Lummox?"

"Yes, but more than that, I have here a careful documentation of the arguments…unanswerable arguments I may say, to…"

"Just a moment. That word 'demands' which you used; does it appear in the petition?"

"No, your honor, that came from my heart, from the fullness of…"

"Your heart has just led you into contempt. Do you wish to rephrase it?"

Esklund stared, then said grudgingly, "I withdraw the word. No contempt was intended."

"Very well. The petition is received; the clerk will record it. Decision later. Now as to that speech you wished to make: from the size of your manuscript I surmise that you will require about two hours?"

"I believe that will be ample, your honor," Esklund answered, somewhat mollified.

"Good. Bailiff!"

"Your honor?"

"Can you dig up a soap box?"

"Why, I believe so, sir."

“Excellent. Place it on the lawn outside. Doctor Esklund, everyone of us enjoys free speech…so enjoy yourself. That soap box is yours for the next two hours.”

Dr. Esklund turned the color of eggplant. “You’ll hear from us!”

“No doubt.”

“We know your sort! Traitors to mankind. Renegades! Trifling with…”

“Remove him.”

The bailiff did so, grinning. One of the reporters followed them out. Greenberg said gently, “We seem to have trimmed it down to indispensables now. We have several issues before us, but they have in common the same sheaf of facts. Unless there is objection, we will hear testimony for all issues together, then pass on the issues one at a time. Objection?”

The lawyers looked at each other. Finally Mr. Ito’s attorney said, “Your honor, it would seem to me to be fairer to try them one at a time.”

“Possibly. But if we do, we’ll be here until Christmas. I dislike to make so many busy people go over the same ground repeatedly. But a separate trial of the facts to a jury is your privilege…bearing in mind, if you lose, your principal will have to bear the added costs alone.”

Mr. Ito’s son tugged at the sleeve of the lawyer and whispered to him. The lawyer nodded and said, “We’ll go along with a joint hearing…as to facts.”

“Very well. Further objection?” There was none. Greenberg turned to O’Farrell. “Judge, is this room equipped with truth meters?”

“Eh? Why, yes. I hardly ever use them.”

“I like them.” He turned to the others. “Truth meters will be hooked up. No one is required to use one, but anyone choosing not to will be sworn. This court, as is its privilege, will take judicial notice of and will comment on the fact if anyone refuses the use of a truth meter.”

John Thomas whispered to Betty, “Watch your step, Slugger.”

She whispered back, “I will, smarty! You watch yours.”

Judge O’Farrell said to Greenberg, “It will take some time to rig them. Hadn’t we better break for lunch?”

“Oh yes, lunch. Attention, everyone…this court does not recess for lunch. I’ll ask the bailiff to take orders for coffee and sandwiches or whatever you like while the clerk is rigging the meters. We will eat here at the table. In the meantime…” Greenberg fumbled for cigarettes, fumbled again. “…has anybody got a match?”

Out on the lawn, Lummox, having considered the difficult question of Betty’s right to give orders, had come to the conclusion that she possibly had a special status. Each of the John Thomases had introduced into his life a person equivalent to Betty; each had insisted that the person in question must be humored in every whim.

This John Thomas had already begun the process with Betty; therefore, it was best to go along with what she wanted as long as it was not too much trouble. He lay down and went to sleep, leaving his watchman eye on guard.

He slept restlessly, disturbed by the tantalizing odor of steel. After a time he woke up and stretched, causing the cage to bulge. It seemed to him that John Thomas had been gone an unnecessarily long time. On second thought, he had not liked the way that man had taken John Thomas away…no, he hadn't liked it a bit. He wondered what he should do, if anything? What would John Thomas say, if he were here?

The problem was too complex. He lay down and tasted the bars of his cage. He refrained from eating them; he merely tried them for flavor. A bit grucky, he decided, but good.

Inside, Chief Dreiser had completed his testimony and had been followed by Karnes and Mendoza. No argument had developed and the truth meters had stayed steady; Mr. deGrasse had insisted on amplifying parts of the testimony. Mr. Ito's lawyer stipulated that Mr. Ito had fired at Lummox; Mr. Ito's son was allowed to describe and show photographs of the consequences. Only Mrs. Donahue's testimony was needed to complete the story of L-day.

Greenberg turned to her lawyer. "Mr. Beanfield, will you examine your client, or shall the court continue?"

"Go ahead, your honor. I may add a question or two."

"Your privilege. Mrs. Donahue, tell us what happened."

"I certainly shall. Your honor, friends, distinguished visitors, unaccustomed as I am to public speaking, nevertheless, in my modest way, I believe I am…"

"Never mind that, Mrs. Donahue. Just the facts. Last Monday afternoon."

"But I was!"

"Very well, go ahead. Keep it simple."

She sniffed. "Well! I was lying down, trying to snatch a few minutes rest… I have so many responsibilities, clubs and charitable committees and things…"

Greenberg was watching the truth meter over her head. The needle wobbled restlessly, but did not kick over into the red enough to set off the warning buzzer. He decided that it was not worth while to caution her.

"…when suddenly I was overcome with a nameless dread."

The needle swung far into the red, a ruby light flashed and the buzzer gave out a loud rude noise. Somebody started to giggle; Greenberg said hastily, "Order in the court. The bailiff is instructed to remove any spectator making a disturbance."

Mrs. Donahue broke off suddenly when the buzzer sounded. Mr. Beanfield, looking grim, touched her sleeve and said, "Never mind that, dear lady. Just tell the court about the noise you heard and what you saw and what you did."

"He's leading the witness," objected Betty.

"Never mind," said Greenberg. "Somebody has to."

"But…"

"Objection overruled. Witness will continue."

"Well! Uh…well, I heard this noise and I wondered what in the world it was. I peeked out and there was this great ravening beast charging back and forth and…"

The buzzer sounded again; a dozen spectators laughed. Mrs. Donahue said angrily, "Will somebody shut that silly thing off? How anyone can be expected to testify with that going on is more than I can see."

"Order!" called Greenberg. "If there is more demonstration, the court will find it necessary to hold someone in contempt." He went on to Mrs. Donahue: "Once a witness has accepted the use of the truth meter the decision cannot be changed. But the data supplied by it is instructive merely; the court is not bound by it. Continue."

"Well, I should hope so. I never told a lie in my life?"

The buzzer remained silent; Greenberg reflected that she must believe it. "I mean," he added, "that the court makes up its own mind. It does not allow a machine to do so for it."

"My father always said that gadgets like that were spawn of the devil. He said that an honest business man should not…"

"Please, Mrs. Donahue"

Mr. Beanfield whispered to her. Mrs. Donahue went on more quietly, "Well, there was that *thing*, that enormous beast kept by that boy next door. It was eating my rose bushes."

"And what did you do?"

"I didn't know what to do. I grabbed the first thing at hand…a broom, it was…and rushed out doors. The beast came charging at me and…"

Buzzzzzzz!

"Shall we go over that again, Mrs. Donahue?"

"Well…anyhow, I rushed at it and began to beat it on the head. It snapped at me. Those great teeth…"

Buzzzzz!

"Then what happened, Mrs. Donahue?"

"Well, it turned away, the cowardly thing, and ran out of my yard. I don't know where it went. But there was my lovely garden, just *ruined*." The needle quivered but the buzzer did not sound.

Greenberg turned to the lawyer. "Mr. Beanfield, have you examined the damage to Mrs. Donahue's garden?"

"Yes, your honor."

"Will you tell us the extent of the damage?"

Mr. Beanfield decided that he would rather lose a client than be buzzed in open court by that confounded toy. "Five bushes were eaten, your honor, in whole or in part. There was minor damage to the lawn and a hole made in an ornamental fence."

"Financial damage?"

Mr. Beanfield said carefully, “The amount we are suing for is before you, your honor.”

“That is not responsive, Mr. Beanfield.”

Mr. Beanfield shrugged mentally and struck Mrs. Donahue off his list of paying properties. “Oh, around a couple of hundred, your honor, in property damage. But the court should allow for inconvenience and mental anguish.”

Mrs. Donahue yelped. “That’s preposterous! My *prize* roses.”

The needle jumped and fell back too quickly to work the buzzer. Greenberg said wearily, “What prizes, Mrs. Donahue?”

Her lawyer cut in, “They were right next to Mrs. Donahue’s well-known champion plants. Her courageous action saved the more valuable bushes, I am happy to say.”

“Is there more to add?”

“I think not. I have photographs, marked and identified, to offer.”

“Very well.”

Mrs. Donahue glared at her lawyer. “Well! I have something to add. There is one thing I insist on, absolutely *insist* on, and that is that that dangerous, blood-thirsty beast be *destroyed!*”

Greenberg turned to Beanfield. “Is that a formal prayer, counsellor? Or may we regard it as rhetoric?”

Beanfield looked uncomfortable. “We have such a petition, your honor.”

“The court will receive it.”

Betty butted in with, “Hey, wait a minute! All Lummie did was eat a few of her measly old…”

“Later, Miss Sorenson.”

“But…”

“Later, please. You will have your chance. The court is now of the opinion that it has all the pertinent facts. Does anyone have any new facts to bring out, or does anyone wish to question further any witness? Or bring forward another witness?”

“We do,” Betty said at once.

“You do what?”

“We want to call a new witness.”

“Very well. Do you have him here?”

“Yes, your honor. Just outside. Lummox.”

Greenberg looked thoughtful. “Do I understand that you are proposing to put, uh, Lummox on the stand in his own defense?”

“Why not? He can talk.”

A reporter turned suddenly to a colleague and whispered to him, then hurried out of the room. Greenberg chewed his lip. “I know that,” he admitted. “I exchanged a few words with him myself. But the ability to talk does not alone make a competent witness. A child may learn to talk, after a fashion, before it is a year old, but only rarely is a child of tender years…less than five, let us say…found competent to give testimony. The court takes judicial notice that members of non-human races…non-human in the biological sense…

may give evidence. But nothing has been presented to show that this particular extra-terrestrial is competent."

John Thomas whispered worriedly to Betty, "Have you slipped your cams? There's no telling what Lummie would say."

"Hush!" She went on to Greenberg. "Look, Mr. Commissioner, you've said a fancy lot of words, but what do they mean? You are about to pass judgment on Lummox…and you won't even bother to ask him a question. You say he can't give competent evidence. Well, I've seen others around here who didn't do so well. I'll bet if you hook a truth meter to Lummie, it won't buzz. Sure, he did things he shouldn't have done. He ate some scrawny old rose bushes and he ate Mr. Ito's cabbages. What's horrible about that? When you were a kid, did you ever swipe a cookie when you thought nobody was looking?"

She took a deep breath. "Suppose when you swiped that cookie, somebody hit you in the face with a broom? Or fired a gun at you? Wouldn't you be scared? Wouldn't you run? Lummie is friendly. Everybody around here knows that…or at least if they don't they are stupider and more irresponsible than he is. But did anybody try to reason with him? Oh, no! They bullied him and fired off guns at him and scared him to death and chased him off bridges. You say Lummie is incompetent. Who is incompetent? All these people who were mean to him? Or Lummie? Now they want to kill him. If a little boy swiped a cookie, I suppose they'd chop his head off, just to be sure he wouldn't do it again. Is somebody crazy? What kind of a farce is this?"

She stopped, tears running down her cheeks. It was a talent which had been useful in school dramatics; to her own surprise she found that these tears were real.

"Are you through?" asked Greenberg.

"I guess so. For now, anyway?"

"I must say that you put it very movingly. But a court should not be swayed by emotion. Is it your theory that the major portion of the damage…let us say everything but the rose bushes and the cabbages…arose from improper acts of human beings and therefore cannot be charged to Lummox or his owner?"

"Figure it yourself, your honor. The tail generally follows the dog. Why not ask Lummie how it looked to him?"

"We'll get to that. On another issue: I cannot grant that your analogy is valid. We are dealing here, not with a little boy, but with an animal. If this court should order the destruction of this animal, it would not be in spirit of vengeance nor of punishment, for an animal is presumed not to understand such values. The purpose would be preventive, in order that a potential danger might not be allowed to develop into damage to life or limb or property. Your little boy can be restrained by the arms of his nurse…but we are dealing with a creature weighing several tons, capable of crushing a man with a careless step. There is no parallel in your cookie-stealing small boy."

“There isn’t, huh? That little boy can grow up and wipe out a whole city by pushing one teeny little button. So off with his head before he grows up. Don’t ask him why he took the cookie, don’t ask him anything! He’s a bad boy—chop his head off and save trouble.”

Greenberg found himself again biting his lip. He said, “It is your wish that we examine Lummox?”

“I said so, didn’t I?”

“I’m not sure what you said. The court will consider it.”

Mr. Lombard said quickly, “Objection, your honor. If this extraordinary…”

“Hold your objection, please. Court will recess for ten minutes. All will remain.” Greenberg got up and walked away. He took out a cigarette, found again that he had no light, stuck the pack back in his pocket.

Blast the girl! He had had it figured how to dispose of this case smoothly, with credit to the department and everybody satisfied… except the Stuart boy, but that could not be helped…the boy and this precocious preposterous young mammal who had him under her wing. And under her thumb, too, he added.

He could not allow this unique specimen to be destroyed. But he had meant to do it suavely…deny the petition of that old battle-axe, since it was obviously from malice, and tell the police chief privately to forget the other one. The Save-the-World-for-the-Neanderthals petition didn’t matter. But this cocky girl, by talking when she should have listened, was going to make it appear that a departmental court could be pushed into risking public welfare over a lot of sentimental, anthropomorphic bosh!

Confound her pretty blue eyes!

They would accuse him of being influenced by those pretty blue eyes, too. Too bad the child wasn’t homely.

The animal’s owner was responsible for the damage; there were a thousand “strayed animal” cases to justify a ruling—since this was not the planet Tencora. That stuff about it being the fault of the persons who frightened him off was a lot of prattle. But the e.-t., as a specimen for science, was worth far more than the damage; the decision would not hurt the boy financially.

He realized that he had allowed himself to fall into a most unjudicial frame of mind. The defendant’s ability to pay was not his business.

“Excuse me, your honor. Please don’t monkey with those things.”

He looked up, ready to snap somebody’s head off, to find himself looking at the clerk of the court. He then saw that he had been fiddling with the switches and controls of the clerk’s console. He snatched his hands away. “Sorry.”

“A person who doesn’t understand these things,” the clerk said apologetically, “can cause an awful lot of trouble.”

“True. Unfortunately true.” He turned away sharply. “The court

will come to order."

He sat down and turned at once to Miss Sorenson. "The court rules that Lummox is not a competent witness."

Betty gasped. "Your honor, you are being most unfair!"

"Possibly."

She thought for a moment. "We want a change of venue."

"Where did you learn that word? Never mind, you had one when the department intervened. That ends it. Now keep quiet for a change."

She turned red. "You ought to disqualify yourself!"

Greenberg had intended to be calm, positively Olympian, in his manner. He now found it necessary to take three slow breaths. "Young lady," he said carefully, "you have been trying to confuse the issue all day. There is no need for you to speak now; you have said too much already. Understand me?"

"I have not, I will too, and I didn't either!"

"What? Repeat that, please?"

She looked at him. "No, I had better take it back…or you will be talking about 'contempt'."

"No, no. I wanted to memorize it. I don't think I have ever heard quite so sweeping a statement. Never mind. Just hold your tongue. If you know how. You'll be allowed to talk later."

"Yes, sir."

He turned to the others. "The court announced earlier that there would be due notice if we were to continue to terminer. The court sees no reason not to. Objection?"

The attorneys shifted uncomfortably and looked at each other. Greenberg turned to Betty. "How about you?"

"Me? I thought I wasn't allowed to vote."

"Shall we conclude these issues today?"

She glanced at John Thomas, then said dully, "No objection," then leaned to him and whispered, "Oh, Johnnie, I *tried!*"

He patted her hand under the table. "I know you did, Slugger."

Greenberg pretended not to hear. He went on in a cold, official voice. "This court has before it a petition asking for the destruction of the extra-terrestrial Lummox on the grounds that it is dangerous and uncontrollable. The facts have not sustained that view; the petition is denied.?"

Betty gasped and squealed. John Thomas looked startled, then grinned for the first time. "Order, please," Greenberg said mildly. "We have here another petition to the same end, but for different reasons." He held up the one submitted. by the Keep Earth Human League. "This court finds itself unable to follow the alleged reasoning. Petition denied."

"We have four criminal charges, I am dismissing all four. The law requires…"

The city attorney looked startled. "But, your honor—"

"If you have a point, will you save it? No criminal intent can be

found here, which therefore would make it appear that there could be no crime. However, constructive intent may appear where the law requires a man to exercise due prudence to protect others and it is on this ground that these issues must be judged. Prudence is based on experience, personal or vicarious, not on impossible prescience. In the judgment of this court, the precautions taken were prudent in the light of experience…experience up to last Monday afternoon, that is to say." He turned and addressed John Thomas. "What I mean, young man, is this: your precautions were 'prudent' so far as you knew. Now you know better. If that beast gets loose again, it will go hard with you."

Johnnie swallowed. "Yessir."

"We have remaining the civil matters of damage, Here the criteria are different. The guardian of a minor, or the owner of an animal, is responsible for damage committed by that child or that animal, the law holding that it is better that the owner or guardian suffer than the innocent third party. Except for one point, which I will reserve for the moment, these civil actions fall under that rule. First, let me note that one or more of these issues ask for real, punitive, and exemplary damages. Punitive and exemplary damages are denied; there are no grounds. I believe that we have arrived at real damages in each case and counsels have so stipulated. As to costs, the Department of Spatial Affairs has intervened in the public interest; costs will be borne by the department."

Betty whispered, "A good thing we homesteaded him. Look at those insurance vultures grin."

Greenberg went on, "I reserved one point. The question has been raised indirectly that this Lummox may not be an animal…and therefore not a chattel…but may be a sentient being within the meaning of 'the Customs of Civilizations'…and therefore his own master." Greenberg hesitated. He was about to add his bit to the "Customs of Civilizations"; he was anxious not to be overruled. "We have long disavowed slavery; no sentient being may be owned. But if Lummox is sentient, what have we? May Lummox be held personally responsible? It would not appear that he has sufficient knowledge of our customs, nor does it appear that he is among us by his own choice. Are the putative owners in fact his guardians and in that way responsible? All these questions turn on this: is Lummox a chattel, or a free being?

"This court expressed its opinion when it ruled that Lummox might not testify…at this time. But this court is not equipped to render a final decision, no matter how strongly it may believe that Lummox is an animal.

"The court will therefore start proceedings on its own motion to determine the status of Lummox. In the meantime the local authorities will take charge of Lummox and will be held responsible both for his safety and for public safety with respect to him." Greenberg shut up and sat back.

A fly would have had his choice of open mouths. First to recover was the attorney for Western Mutual, Mr. Schneider. “Your honor? Where does that leave us?”

“I don’t know.”

“But…see here, your honor, let’s face the facts. Mrs. Stuart hasn’t any property or funds that can be attached; she’s the beneficiary of a trust. Same for the boy. We expected to levy against the beast itself; he will bring a good price in the proper market. Now you have, if you will permit me, upset the apple cart. If one of those scientific…*hrrumph!*…persons starts a long series of tests, years long perhaps, or throws doubt on the beast’s status as a chattel… well, where should we look for relief? Should we sue the city?”

Lombard was on his feet instantly. “Now, look here, you can’t sue the city! The city is one of the damaged parties. On that theory…”

“Order,” Greenberg said sternly. “None of those questions can be answered now. All civil actions will be continued until the status of Lummox is clarified.” He looked at the ceiling. “There is another possibility. It would seem that this creature came to Earth in the *Trail Blazer*. If my memory of history serves, all specimens brought back by that ship were government property. If Lummox is a chattel, he may nevertheless not be private property. In that event, the source of relief may be a matter of more involved litigation.”

Mr. Schneider looked stunned, Mr. Lombard looked angry, John Thomas looked confused and whispered to Betty, “What’s he trying to say? Lummox belongs to me.”

“Ssh…” Betty whispered. “I *told* you we would get out of it. Oh, Mr. Greenberg is a honey lamb!”

“But…”

“Hush up! We’re ahead.”

Mr. Ito’s son had kept quiet except when testifying. Now he stood up. “Your honor?”

“Yes, Mr. Ito?”

“I don’t understand any of this. I’m just a farmer. But I do want to know one thing. *Who’s going to pay for my father’s greenhouses?*”

John Thomas got to his feet. “I am,” he said simply.

Betty tugged at his sleeve. “Sit down, you idiot!”

“You hush up, Betty. You’ve talked enough.” Betty hushed up. “Mr. Greenberg, everybody else has been talking. Can I say something?”

“Go ahead.”

“I’ve listened to a lot of stuff all day. People trying to make out that Lummox is dangerous, when he’s not People trying to have him killed, just for spite, yes, I mean you, Mrs. Donahue!”

“Address the court, please,” Greenberg said quietly.

“I’ve heard you say a lot of things, too. I didn’t follow all of them but, if you will pardon me, sir, some of them struck me as pretty silly. Excuse me.”

"No contempt intended, I'm sure."

"Well…take this about whether Lummox is or isn't a chattel. Or whether he's bright enough to vote. Lummox is pretty bright, I guess nobody but me knows just how bright. But he's never had any education and he's never been anywhere. But that hasn't anything to do with who he belongs to. He belongs to *me*. Just the way I belong to him…we grew up together. Now I know I'm responsible for that damage last Monday…will you keep quiet, Betty! I can't pay for it now, but I'll pay for it. I…"

"Just a moment, young man. The court will not permit you to admit liability without counsel. If that is your intention, court will appoint counsel."

"You said I could have my say."

"Continue. Noted for the record that this is not binding."

"Sure, it's binding, because I'm going to do it. Pretty soon my education trust comes due and it would about cover it. I guess I can…"

"John Thomas!" his mother called out sharply. "You'll do no such thing!"

"Mother, you had better keep out of this, too. I was just going to say…"

"You're not to say anything. Your honor, he is…"

"Order!" Greenberg interrupted. "None of this is binding. Let the lad speak."

"Thank you, sir. I was through, anyway. But I've got something to say to *you*, sir, too. Lummie is timid. I can handle him because he trusts me—but if you think I'm going to let a lot of strangers poke him and prod him and ask him silly questions and put him through mazes and things, you'd just better think again—because I won't stand for it! Lummie is sick right now. He's had more excitement than is good for him. The poor thing…"

Lummox had waited for John Thomas longer than he liked because he was not sure where John Thomas had gone. He had seen him disappear in the crowd without being sure whether or not Johnnie had gone into the big house nearby. He had tried to sleep after he woke up the first time, but people had come poking around, and he had had to wake himself up repeatedly because his watchman circuit did not have much judgment. Not that he thought of it that way; he was merely aware that he had come to with his alarms jangling time after time.

At last he decided that it was time he located John Thomas and went home. Figuratively, he tore up Betty's orders; after all, Betty was not Johnnie.

So he stepped up his hearing to "search" and tried to locate Johnnie. He listened for a long time, heard Betty's voice several times—but he was not interested in Betty. He continued to listen.

There was Johnnie now! He tuned out everything else and listened. He was in the big house all right. Hey! Johnnie sounded just

the way he did when he had arguments with his mother. Lummox spread his hearing a little and tried to find out what was going on.

They were talking about things he knew nothing about. But one thing was clear: somebody was being mean to Johnnie. His mother? Yes, be heard her once and he knew that she had the privilege of being mean to Johnnie, just as Johnnie could talk mean to him and it didn't really matter. But there was somebody else…several others, and not a one of them had any such privilege.

Lummox decided that it was time to act. He heaved to his feet.

John Thomas got no farther in his peroration than "The poor thing…" There were screams and shouts from outside; everybody in court turned to look. The noises got rapidly closer and Mr. Greenberg was just going to send the bailiff to find out about it when suddenly it became unnecessary. The door to the courtroom bulged, then burst off its hinges. The front end of Lummox came in, tearing away part of the wall, and ending with him wearing the door frame as a collar. He opened his mouth. "Johnnie!" he piped.

"Lummox!" cried his friend. "Stand still. Stay right where you are. Don't move an inch!"

Of all the faces in the room, that of Special Commissioner Greenberg presented the most interesting mixed expression.

CHAPTER V

A Matter of Viewpoint

THE Right Honorable Mr. Kiku, Under Secretary for Spatial Affairs, opened a desk drawer and looked over his collection of pills. There was no longer any doubt; his stomach ulcer was acting up again. He selected one and turned wearily back to his tasks.

He read an order from the departmental Bureau of Engineering grounding all *Pelican*-class interplanetary ships until certain modifications were accomplished. Mr. Kiku did not bother to study the attached engineering report, but signed approval, checked "EFFECTIVE IMMEDIATELY" and dropped the papers in the outgoing basket. Engineering safety in space was the responsibility of BuEng; Kiku himself knew nothing of engineering and did not wish to; he would back up the decisions of his chief engineer, or fire him and get another one.

But he realized glumly that the financial lords who owned the *Pelican*-class ships would soon be knocking the ear of the Secretary…and, shortly thereafter, the Secretary, out of his depth and embarrassed by the political power wielded by those fine gentlemen, would dump them in his lap.

He was beginning to have his doubts about this new Secretary; he was not shaping up.

The next item was for his information only and had been routed to him because of standing orders that anything concerning the Secretary must reach his desk, no matter how routine. This item appeared routine and unimportant: according to the synopsis an organization calling itself "The Friends of Lummox" and headed by a Mrs. Beulah Murgatroyd was demanding an audience with the Secretary of Spatial Affairs; they were being shunted to the Special Assistant Secretary (Public Relations).

Mr. Kiku read no farther. Wes Robbins would kiss them to death and neither he nor the Secretary would be disturbed. He amused himself with the idea of punishing the Secretary by inflicting Mrs. Murgatroyd on him, but it was merely a passing fantasy; the Secretary's time must be reserved for really important cornerstone-layings, not wasted on crackpot societies. Any organization calling itself "The Friends of This or That" always consisted of someone with an axe to grind, plus the usual assortment of prominent custard heads and professional stuffed shirts. But such groups could be a nuisance…therefore never grant them the Danegeld they demanded.

He sent it to files and picked up a memorandum from BuEcon: a virus had got into the great yeast plant at St. Louis; the projection showed a possibility of protein shortage and more drastic rationing. Even starvation on Earth was no direct interest to Mr. Kiku. But he stared thoughtfully while the slide rule in his head worked a few figures, then he called as assistant. "Wong, have you seen BuEcon Ay0428?"

"Uh, I believe so, boss. The St. Louis yeast thing?"

"Yes. What have you done about it?"

"Er, nothing. Not my pidgin, I believe."

"You believe, eh? Our out-stations are your business, aren't they? Look over your shipping schedules for the next eighteen months, correlate with Ay0428, and project. You may have to buy Australian sheep…and actually get them into our possession. We can't have our people going hungry because some moron in St Louis dropped his socks in a yeast vat."

"Yes, sir."

Mr. Kiku turned back to work. He realized unhappily that he had been too brusque with Wong. His present frame of mind, he knew, was not Wong's fault, but that of Dr. Ftaeml.

No, not Ftaeml's fault…his own! He knew that he should not harbor race prejudice, not in this job. He was aware intellectually that he himself was relatively safe from persecution that could arise from differences of skin and hair and facial contour for the one reason that weird creatures such as Dr. Ftaeml had made the differences between breeds of men seem less important.

Still, there it was…he hated Ftaeml's very shadow. He could not help it.

If the so-and-so would wear a turban, it would help…instead of walking around with those dirty snakes on his head wiggling like a can of worms. But oh no! the Rargyllians were proud of them. There was a suggestion in their manner that anyone without them was not quite human.

Come now!… Ftaeml was a decent chap. He made a note to invite Ftaeml to dinner, not put it off any longer. After all, he would make certain of deep-hypnotic preparation; the dinner need not be difficult. But his ulcer gave a fresh twinge at the thought.

Kiku did not hold it against the Rargyllian that he had dropped an impossible problem in the department's tired lap; impossible problems were routine. It was just…well, why didn't the monster get a haircut?

The vision of the Chesterfieldian Dr. Ftaeml with a shingle cut, his scalp all lumps and bumps, enabled Mr. Kiku to smile; he resumed work feeling better. The next item was a brief of a field report…oh yes! Sergei Greenberg. Good boy, Sergei. He was reaching for his pen to approve the recommendation even before he had finished reading it.

Instead of signing, he stared for almost half a second, then

punched a button. “Files! Send up the full report of Mr. Greenberg’s field job, the one he got back from a few days ago.”

“Do you have the reference number, sir?”

“That intervention matter…you find it. Wait…it’s, uh, Rt0411, dated Saturday. I want it right now.”

He had only time to dispose of half a dozen items when, seconds later, the delivery tube went *thwong!* and a tiny cylinder popped out on his desk. He stuck it into his reading machine and relaxed, with his right thumb resting on a pressure plate to control the speed with which the print fled across the screen.

In less than seven minutes he had zipped through not only a full transcript of the trial but also Greenberg’s report of all else that had happened. Mr. Kiku could read at least two thousand words a minute with the aid of a machine; oral recordings and personal interviews he regarded as time wasters. But when the machine clicked off he decided on an oral report, He leaned to his interoffice communicator and flipped a switch. “Greenberg.”

Greenberg looked up from his desk. “Howdy, boss.”

“Come here, please.” He switched off without politenesses.

Greenberg decided that the bossman’s stomach must be bothering him again. But it was too late to find some urgent business outside the departmental building; he hurried upstairs and reported with his usual cheery grin. “Howdy, Chief.”

“Morning. I’ve been reading your intervention report.”

“So?”

“How old are you, Greenberg?”

“Eh? Thirty-seven.”

“Hmm. What is your present rank?”

“Sir? Diplomatic officer second class…acting first.” What the deuce? Uncle Henry knew the answers…he probably knew what size shoes he wore.

“Old enough to have sense,” Kiku mused. “Rank enough to be assigned as ambassador…or executive deputy to a politically-appointed ambassador. Sergei, how come you are so confounded stupid?”

Greenberg’s jaw muscles clamped but he said nothing.

“Well?”

“Sir,” Greenberg answered icily, “you are older and more experienced than I am. May I ask why you are so confounded rude?”

Mr. Kiku’s mouth twitched but he did not smile. “A fair question. My psychiatrist tells me that it is because I am an anarchist in the wrong job. Now sit down and we’ll discuss why you are so thick-headed. Cigarettes in the chair arm.” Greenberg sat down, discovered that he did not have a light, and asked for one.

“I don’t smoke,” answered Kiku. “I thought those were the self-striking kind. Aren’t they?”

“Oh. So they are.” Greenberg lit up.

“See? You don’t use your eyes and ears. Sergei, once that beast

talked, you should have postponed the hearing until we knew all about him."

"Mmmm… I suppose so."

"You *suppose* so! Son, your subconscious alarms should have been clanging like a bed alarm on Monday morning. As it is, you let the implications be sprung on you when you thought the trial was over. And by a girl, a mere child. I'm glad I don't read the papers; I'll bet they had fun."

Greenberg blushed. He did read the papers.

"Then when she had you tangled up like a rangtangtoo trying to find its own feet, instead of facing her challenge and meeting it… Meeting it how? By adjourning, of course, and ordering the investigation you should have ordered to start with, you…"

"But I *did* order it."

"Don't interrupt me; I want you browned on both sides. Then you proceeded to hand down a decision the like of which has not been seen since Solomon ordered the baby sawed in half. What mail-order law school did you attend?"

"Harvard," Greenberg answered sullenly.

"Hmm… Well, I shouldn't be too harsh on you; you're handicapped. But by the seventy-seven seven-sided gods of the Sarvanchil, what did you do next? First you deny a petition from the local government itself to destroy this brute in the interest of public safety…then you reverse yourself, grant the prayer and tell them to kill him…subject only to routine approval of this department. All in ten minutes. Exeunt omnes, laughing. Son, I don't mind you making a fool of yourself, but must you include the department?"

"Boss," Greenberg said humbly, "I made a mistake. When I saw the mistake, I did the only thing I could do; I reversed myself. The beast really is dangerous and there are no proper facilities for confining it in Westville. If it had not been beyond my power, I would have ordered it destroyed at once, without referring back for the department's approval…for your approval."

"Hummph!"

"You weren't sitting where I was, sir. You didn't see that solid wall bulge in. You didn't see the destruction."

"I'm not impressed. Did you ever see a city that had been flattened by a fusion bomb? What does one courthouse wall matter?…probably some thieving contractor didn't beef it up."

"But, boss, you should have seen the cage he broke out of first. Steel I-beams, welded. He tore them like straw."

"I recall that you inspected him in that cage. Why didn't you see to it that he was confined so that he couldn't get out?"

"Huh? Why, it's no business of the department to provide jails."

"Son, a factor concerning in any way anything from 'Out There' is the very personal business of this department. You know that. Once you know it awake and asleep, clear down to your toes, you'll begin to trot through a perfunctory routine, like an honorary

chairman sampling soup in a charity hospital. You were supposed to be there with your nose twitching and your ears quivering, on the lookout for 'special situations.' You flubbed. Now tell me about this beast. I read the report, I saw his picture. But I don't *feel* him."

"Well, it's a non-balancing multipedal type, eight legs and about seven feet high at the dorsal, ridge. It's…"

Kiku sat up straight. "Eight legs? Hands?"

"Hands? No."

"Manipulative organs of any sort? A modified foot?"

"None, chief…if there had been, I would have ordered a full-scale investigation at once. The feet are about the size of nail kegs, and as dainty. Why?"

"Never mind. Another matter. Go on."

"The impression is something like a rhinoceros, something like a triceratops, though the articulation is unlike anything native to this planet. 'Lummox' his young master calls him and the name fits. It's a rather engaging beast, but stupid. That's the danger; it's so big and powerful that it is likely to hurt people through clumsiness and stupidity. It does talk, but about as well as a four-year-old child…in fact it sounds as if it had swallowed a baby girl."

"Why stupid? I note that its master with the history-book name claims that it is bright."

Greenberg smiled. "He is prejudiced. I talked with it, boss. It's stupid."

"I can't see that you have established that. Assuming that an e.-t. is stupid because he can't speak our language well is like assuming that an Italian is illiterate because he speaks broken English. A non-sequitur."

"But look, boss, no *hands*. Maximum intelligence lower than monkeys. Maybe as high as a dog. Though not likely."

"Well, I'll concede that you are orthodox in xenological theory, but that is all. Some day that assumption is going to rise up and slap the classic xenist in the face. We'll find a civilization that doesn't need to pick at things with patty-paws, evolved beyond it."

"Want to bet?"

"No. Where is this 'Lummox' now?"

Greenberg looked flustered. "Boss, this report I am about to make is now in the microfilm lab. It should be on your desk any minute."

"Okay, so you were on the ball—this time. Let's have it."

"I got chummy with the local judge and asked him to keep me advised. Of course they couldn't throw this critter into the local Bastille; in fact they did not have anything strong enough to hold him…so they had learned, the hard way. And nothing could be built in a hurry that would be strong enough…believe me, that cage he crushed out of was *strong*. But the local police chief got a brain storm; they had an empty reservoir with sides about thirty feet high, reinforced concrete…part of the fire system. So they built a ramp

and herded him down into it, then removed the ramp. It looked like a good dodge; the creature isn't built for jumping."

"Sounds okay."

"Yes, but that isn't all. Judge O'Farrell told me that the chief of police was so jittery that he decided not to wait for departmental okay; he went ahead with the execution.

"*What?*"

"Let me finish. He did not tell anybody—but accidentally-on-purpose the intake valve was opened that night and the reservoir filled up. In the morning there was Lummox, on the bottom. So Chief Dreiser assumed that his 'accident' had been successful and that he had drowned the beast."

"So?"

"It did not bother Lummox at all. He had been under water several hours, but when the water drained off, he woke up, stood up, and said, 'Good morning.'"

"Amphibious, probably. What steps have you taken to put a stop to this high-handedness?"

"Just a second, sir. Dreiser knew that firearms and explosives were useless…you saw the transcript…at least of power safe enough to use inside a town. So he tried poison. Knowing nothing about the creature, he used half a dozen sorts in quantities sufficient for a regiment and concealed in several kinds of food."

"Well?"

"Lummox gobbled them all. They didn't even make him sleepy; in fact it seemed to stimulate his appetite, for the next thing he did was to eat the intake valve and the reservoir started to fill up again. They had to shut it off from the pumping station."

Kiku snickered. "I'm beginning to like this Lummox. Did you say he *ate* the valve? What was it made of?"

"I don't know. The usual alloy, I suppose."

"Hmm…seems to like a bit of roughage in its diet. Perhaps it has a craw like a bird."

"I wouldn't be surprised."

"What did the Chief do next?"

"Nothing as yet. I asked O'Farrell to impress on Dreiser that he was likely to end up in a penal colony thirty light-years from Westville if he persisted in bucking the department. So he is waiting and trying to figure out his problem. His latest notion is to cast Lummox in concrete and let him die at his own convenience. But O'Farrell put the nix on that one—inhumane."

"So Lummox is still in the reservoir, waiting for us to act, eh?"

"I believe so, sir. He was yesterday."

"Well, be can wait there, I suppose, until other action can be taken." Mr. Kiku picked up Greenberg's shortform report and recommendation.

Greenberg said, "I take it that you are overruling me, sir?"

"No. What gave you that idea?" He signed the order permitting

the destruction of Lummox and let it be swallowed by the outgoing basket. “I don’t reverse a man’s decision without firing him…and I have another job for you.”

“Oh.” Greenberg felt a twinge of compassion; he had been expecting, with relief, that the chief would reprieve Lummox’s death sentence. Well…too bad…but the beast *was* dangerous.

Mr. Kiku went on, “Are you afraid of snakes?”

“No. I rather like them.”

“Excellent! Though it’s a feeling I can’t imagine. I’ve always been deathly afraid of them. Once when I was a boy in Africa… never mind. Have you ever worked closely with Rargyllians? I don’t recall.”

Greenberg suddenly understood. “I used a Rargyllian interpreter in the Vega-VI affair. I get along all right with Rargyllians.”

“I wish I did. Sergei, I have some business which involves a Rargyllian interpreter, a Dr. Ftaeml. You may have heard of him.”

“Yes, of course, sir.”

“I’ll admit that, as Rargyllians go…” He made the noun sound like a swear word. “…Ftaeml is all right. But this involvement has the odor of trouble…and I find my own nose for trouble blanked out by this phobia of mine. So I’m putting you on as my assistant to sniff for me.”

“I thought you didn’t trust my nose, boss?”

“We’ll let the blind lead the blind, if you’ll forgive a switch in metaphor. Perhaps between us we’ll sniff it out.”

“Yes, sir. May I ask the nature of the assignment?”

“Well…” Before Mr. Kiku could answer, his secretary’s light flashed and her voice stated, “Your hypnotherapist is here, sir.”

The Under Secretary glanced at his clock and said, “Where does the time go?”…then to the communicator: “Put him in my dressing room. I’ll be in.” He continued to Greenberg, “Ftaeml will be here in thirty minutes. I can’t stop to talk, I’ve got to get braced for it. You’ll find what there is…little enough!…in my ‘pending-urgent’ file.” Mr. Kiku glanced at his incoming basket, which had filled to overflowing while they talked. “It won’t take five minutes. Spend the rest of the time clearing up that stack of waste paper. Sign my name and hold anything that you think I must see…but it had better be no more than half a dozen items, or I’ll send you back to Harvard!”

He got up hurriedly, while making a mental note to tell his secretary, from his dressing room, to note everything that went through in the next half hour and let him see it later…he wanted to see how the lad worked. Mr. Kiku was aware that he would die someday and he intended to see to it that Greenberg replaced him. In the meantime life should be as tough for the boy as possible.

The Under Secretary headed for his dressing room, the door ducked aside, contracted behind him; Greenberg was left alone. He was reaching for the pending urgent file when a paper dropped into the incoming basket just as the light on it blinked red and a buzzer

sounded.

He picked up the paper, ran his eye down the middle and had just realized that it really was urgent when a similar light-and-buzzer combination showed at the interoffice communicator and its screen came to life; Greenberg recognized the chief of the bureau of system liaison. “Boss?” the image said excitedly.

Greenberg touched the two-way switch. “Greenberg here,” he answered. “I’m keeping the chief’s chair warm for him. Your memo just came in, Stan. I’m reading it.”

Ibañez looked annoyed. “Never mind that. Get me the boss.”

Greenberg hesitated. Ibañez’s problem was simple, but sticky. Ships from Venus were regularly granted pratique without delay, each ship’s doctor being a public health deputy. But the *Ariel*, already due at Port Libya, had suddenly been placed under quarantine by her doctor and was now waiting in a parking orbit. The Venerian foreign minister was aboard…most unfortunately, as Venus was expected to support Terra’s position against Mars in the impending triangular conference.

Greenberg could stall the touchy problem until the boss was free; he could break in on the boss; he could go over the boss’s head to the Secretary himself (which meant picking an answer and presenting it so as to get that answer approved); or…he could act, using Mr. Kiku’s authority.

Mr. Kiku could not have predicted the emergency…but the boss had a pesky habit of pushing people off the deep end.

Greenberg’s summing up had been quick. He answered, “Sorry, Stan, you can’t talk to the boss. I am acting for him.”

“Eh? Since when?”

“Just temporarily, but I am.”

Ibañez frowned. “Look, chum, you had better find the boss. Maybe you are signing his name on routine matters…but this is not routine. We’ve got to bring that ship down in a hurry. Your neck would be out a yard if you took it upon yourself to authorize me to overlook a basic rule like quarantine. Use your head.”

Break quarantine? Greenberg recalled the Great Plague of ’51, back in the days when the biologist serenely believed that each planetary life group was immune to the ills of other planets. “We won’t break quarantine.”

Ibañez looked pained. “Sergei, we can jeopardize this conference…‘jeopardize?’ What am I saying? We can’t toss away ten years’ work because some crewman has a slight fever. The quarantine *must* be broken. But I don’t expect you to do it.”

Greenberg hesitated. “He’s under hypnosis, for a tough job coming up. It may be a couple of hours before you can see him.”

Ibañez looked blank. “I’ll have to tackle the Secretary. I don’t dare wait two hours. That sacred cow from Venus is like as not to order his skipper to head home…we can’t risk that.”

“And we can’t risk bringing in an epidemic, either. Here’s what

you do. Call him and tell him you are coming to get him in person. Use a fast scout. Get him aboard and leave the *Ariel* in quarantine orbit. Once you get him aboard the scout…and not before…tell him that both you and he will attend the conference in isolation suits." The isolation suit was a sealed pressure suit; its primary use was to visit planets whose disease hazards had not yet been learned. "The scout ship and crew will have to go into quarantine, too, of course."

"Isolation suit! Oh, he'll love that. Sergei, it would be less damaging to call off the conference. An indignity like that would put him against us for certain. The jerk is poisonously proud."

"Sure he'll love it," Greenberg explained, "once you suggest how to play it. 'Great personal self-sacrifice'…'unwilling to risk the welfare of our beloved sister planet'…'the call of duty takes precedence over any et cetera.' If you don't feel sure of it, take one of the public relations boys along. And look, all through the conference he must be attended by a physician…in a white suit…and a couple of nurses. The conference must stop every now and then while he rests…put a cot and hospital screens in the Hall of Heroes near the conference table. The idea is that he's come down with it himself but is carrying on as his dying act. Get it? Tell him before you land the scout ship…indirectly, of course."

Ibañez looked perturbed. "Do you think that will work?"

"It's up to you to make it work. I'm sending down your memo, ordering quarantine to continue but telling you to use your initiative to insure his presence at the conference."

"Well…all right." Ibañez suddenly grinned. "Never mind the memo. I'm on my way." He switched off.

Greenberg turned back to the desk, feeling exhilarated by the sensation of playing God. He wondered what the boss would have done?…but did not care. There might be many correct solutions, but this was one; it felt right. He reached again for the pending-urgent file.

He stopped. Something was gnawing at the back of his mind. The boss had not wanted to approve that death sentence; he had felt it. Shucks, the boss had *told* him that he was wrong; the proper action was a full investigation. But the boss, as a matter of loyalty to his subordinates, had not reversed him.

But he himself was sitting in the boss's chair at the moment. Well?

Was that why the boss had placed him there? To let him correct his own mistake? No, the boss was subtle but not omniscient; he could not have predicted that Greenberg would consider reopening the matter.

Still… He called the boss's private secretary. "Mildred?"

"Yes, Mr. Greenberg?"

"That brief-and-rec on that intervention I carried out…Rt0411, it was. It went out fifteen minutes ago. I want it back."

"It may have been dispatched," she said doubtfully. "The

communications desk has been running only about seven minutes behind demand today."

"There is such a thing as too much efficiency. If the order has left the building, send a cancellation and a more-to-follow, will you? And get the original document back to me."

Finally he got to the pending-urgent file. As Mr. Kiku had said, the jacket marked "Ftaeml" was not large. He found it subtitled: "Beauty & the Beast" and wondered why. The boss had a sense of humor…but it veered so much that other people had a hard time following it.

Presently his eyebrows lifted. Those tireless interpreters, brokers, go-betweens, and expounders, the Rargyllians, were always popping up in negotiations between diverse races; the presence of Dr. Ftaeml on Earth had tipped Greenberg that something was up with a non-humanoid people…non-human in mentality, creatures so different psychologically that communication was difficult. But he had not expected the learned doctor was representing a race that he had never heard of…something termed "the *Hroshii*."

It was possible that Greenberg had simply forgotten these people with a name like a sneeze; they might be some unimportant breed, at a low cultural level, or economically inconsequential, or not possessing space travel. Or they might have been brought into the Community of Civilizations while Greenberg had been up to his ears in Solar System affairs. Once the human race had made contact with other races having interstellar travel the additions to the family of legal "humans" had come so fast that a man could hardly keep up; the more mankind widened its horizons the harder those horizons were to see.

Or perhaps he knew of the Hroshii under another name? Greenberg turned to Mr. Kiku's universal dictionary and keyed in the name.

The machine considered it, then the reading plate flashed: NO INFORMATION.

Greenberg tried dropping the aspirate on the assumption that the word might have degenerated in the mouths of non-Hroshii…still the same negative.

He dropped the matter. The. universal dictionary in the British Museum was not more knowledgeable than the one in the Under Secretary's office; its working parts occupied an entire building in another part of Capital, and a staff of cyberneticists, semanticians and encyclopedists endlessly fed its hunger for facts. He could be sure that, whatever the "Hroshii" were, the Federation had never heard of them before.

Which was astounding.

Having let astonishment persist a full second Greenberg went on reading. He learned that the Hroshii were already here, not landed on Earth but within waving distance…in a parking orbit fifty thousand miles out. He let himself be astonished for two whole seconds before

going on to discover that the reason he had not heard of their advent was that Dr. Ftaeml had urgently advised Mr. Kiku to keep patrol ships and such from challenging and attempting to board the stranger.

He was interrupted by the return of his report of the Lummox matter, bearing on it Mr. Kiku's confirmation of the sentence. He thought for a moment, then added to the endorsement so that it read: "Recommendation approved…but this action is not to be carried out until after a complete scientific analysis of this creature has been made. Local authorities will surrender custody when required to the Bureau of Xenic Science, which will arrange transportation and select the agency to pursue the evaluation."

Greenberg signed Kiku's name to the change and put it back into the. system. He admitted sheepishly that the order was now weasel-worded…for it was a sure thing that once the xenobiologists got their hands on Lummox they would never let him go. Nevertheless his heart felt suddenly lighter. The other action was wrong; this one was *right*.

He turned his attention back to the Hroshii…and again his eyebrows went up. The Hroshii were not here to establish relations with Earth; they were here to rescue one of their own. According to Dr. Ftaeml, they were convinced that Terra was holding this Hroshia and were demanding that she be surrendered.

Greenberg felt as if he had blundered into a bad melodrama. These people with the asthmatic name had picked the wrong planet for cops-and-robbers nonsense. A non-human on Earth without a passport, without a dossier in the hands of the department, without an approved reason for visiting Earth, would be as helpless as a bride without a ration book. She would be picked up in no time…idiot's delight! she could not even get through quarantine.

Why didn't the boss simply tell them to take their wagon and go home?

Besides, how did they figure she had reached the surface of Earth? Walked? Or taken a swan dive? Star ships did not land; they were served by shuttles. He could just see her tackling the purser of one of those shuttles: "Excuse me, sir, but I am fleeing from my husband hi a distant part of the Galaxy. Do you mind if I hide under this seat and sneak down to your planet?"

"No tickee, no washee"…that's what the purser would say. Those shuttle companies hated deadheads; Greenberg could feel it every time he presented his own diplomatic pass.

Something was niggling at him…then he remembered the boss's inquiry; did Lummox have hands? He realized that the boss must have been wondering whether Lummox could be the missing Hroshia, since Hroshii, according to Ftaeml, had eight legs. Greenberg chuckled. Lummox was not the boy to build and operate star ships, not he nor any of his cousins. Of course the boss had not seen Lummox and did not know how preposterous it was.

And besides that, Lummox had been here more than a hundred years. That would make him very late for supper.

The real question was what to do with the Hroshii now that we were in contact with them. Anything from "Out There" was interesting, educational, and profitable to mankind, once it was analyzed…and a race that had its own interstellar drive was sure to be all of that, squared and cubed. No doubt the boss was kidding them along while developing permanent relations. Very well, it was up to Greenberg to foster that angle and help the boss get past his emotional handicap in dealing through a Rargyllian.

He skimmed the rest of the report. What he had learned so far he had gotten from the synopsis; the rest was a transcript of Ftaeml's flowery circumlocutions. Then he handed the jacket back to the file and tackled the boss's work.

Mr. Kiku announced himself by looking over his shoulder and saying, "That basket is as full as ever."

"Oh. Howdy, boss. Yes, but think of the shape it would have been in if I hadn't torn up every second item without reading it." Greenberg moved from the chair.

Mr. Kiku nodded. "I know. Sometimes I just check 'disapproved' on all the odd-numbered ones."

"Feeling better?"

"Ready to spit in his face. What's a snake got that I haven't got more of?"

"That's the spirit."

"Dr. Morgan is very adept. Try him sometime if your nerves ever act up."

Greenberg grinned. "Boss, the only thing that bothers me is insomnia during working hours. I can't sleep at my desk the way I used to."

"That's the earliest symptom. The mind mechanics will get you yet." Mr. Kiku glanced at the clock. "No word from our friend with the animated hair?"

"Not yet." Greenberg told about the quarantine for the *Ariel* and what he had done. Mr. Kiku nodded, which was equivalent to a citation in front of the regiment in some circles; Greenberg felt a warm glow and went on to tell about the revision in the order for Lummox. He sidled up to it self-consciously.

"Boss, sitting in that chair puts a different slant on things."

"So I discovered, years ago."

"Um, yes. While I was there I got to thinking about that intervention matter."

"Why? We settled it."

"So I thought. Nevertheless…well, anyhow…" He blurted out his change in the order and waited.

Mr. Kiku nodded again. He considered telling Greenberg that it had saved him thinking up a face-saving way of accomplishing the same end, but decided not to. Instead he leaned to his desk,

“Mildred? Heard anything from Dr. Ftaeml?”

“Just arrived, sir.”

“Good. East conference room, please.” He switched off and turned to Greenberg. “Well, son, now for some snake charming. Got your flute with you?”

CHAPTER VI

"Space Is Deep, Excellency"

"DR. FTAEML, this is my associate, Mr. Greenberg."

The Rargyllian bowed low, his double knees and unhuman articulation making it an impressive rite. "I know the distinguished Mr. Greenberg by reputation, through a compatriot who was privileged to work with him. I am honored, sir."

Greenberg answered with the same sort of polite amphigory the cosmic linguist had selected. "I have long wished for the boon of experiencing in person the scholarly aura of Dr. Ftaeml, but I had never dared let the wish blossom into hope. Your servant and pupil, sir."

"Hrrump!" Mr. Kiku interrupted. "Doctor, this delicate affair you are negotiating is of such importance that I, with my constant housekeeping chores, have not been able to give it the close attention it demands. Mr. Greenberg is ambassador extraordinary and minister plenipotentiary of the Federation, commanded for this purpose."

Greenberg's eyes flicked toward his boss, but showed no surprise. He had noticed that the boss had earlier said "associate" rather than "assistant" and had spotted it as the elementary maneuver of enhancing the prestige of one's own negotiators for advantage in protocol—but he had not expected this sudden brevet. He was reasonably sure that Mr. Kiku had not bothered to have the rank approved by the Council; nevertheless the boss could make it stick and his credentials would probably show up on his desk. He wondered if his pay check would show it?

He decided that the boss must have a hunch that this silly business had importance not evident. Or was he simply getting the medusoid off his back?

Dr. Ftaeml bowed again. "Most gratifying to work with his excellency." Greenberg suspected that the Rargyllian was not fooled; nevertheless it probably was really gratifying to him, since it implied that the medusoid was himself of ambassadorial rank.

A female aide brought in refreshments; they stopped for ritual. Ftaeml selected a French wine, while Greenberg and Kiku chose, by Hobson's choice, the only Rargyllian item available—some stuff called "wine" through failure of language but which looked like bread mushed into milk and tasted as if sulphuric acid had been added. Greenberg went through the motions of enjoying it while not letting it pass his lips.

He noticed with respect that the boss actually consumed the stuff.

The rite common to seven out of ten civilizations gave Greenberg time to size up Ftaeml. The medusoid was dressed in an expensive parody of terrestrial formal clothes…cutaway jacket, lacy jabot, and striped shorts. It helped to hide the fact that, while he was a bifurcate humanoid with two legs, two arms, and head at the top of an elongated trunk, he was not remotely human in any but the legal sense.

But Greenberg had grown up in the presence of the Great Martians and had dealt with many other peoples since; he did not expect "men" to look like men and had no prejudice in favor of human form. Ftaeml was, to his eye, handsome and certainly graceful. His dry chitinous skin, purple with green highlights, was as neat as a leopard's pelt and as decorative. The absence of a nose was no matter and was made up for by the mobile, sensitive mouth.

Greenberg decided that Ftaeml must have his tail wrapped around him under his clothes in order to carry out the pretense that he looked like a terrestrial as well as being dressed like one—Rargyllians would go to any trouble to conform to the ancient, urbane rule that when in Rome, one should shoot Roman candles. The other Rargyllian Greenberg had worked with had worn no clothes at all (since the people of Vega-VI wore none) and had carried his tail aloft, like a proud cat. Thinking of Vega-VI made Greenberg shiver, be had found it necessary to bundle up to his ears.

He glanced at the medusoid's tendrils. Pshaw! they weren't snakelike. The boss must have a neurosis as big as a house. Sure, they were about a foot long and as thick as his thumb, but they didn't have eyes, they didn't have mouths or teeth—they were just tendrils. Most races had tendrils of some sort. What were fingers but short tendrils?

Mr. Kiku put down his cup when Dr. Ftaeml set down his glass. "Doctor, you have consulted with your principals?"

"Sir, I have had that honor. And may I take this opportunity to thank you for the scout ship you so graciously placed at my disposal for the unavoidable trips back and forth from the surface of your lovely planet to the vessel of the people I have the privilege of assisting? It is, I may say without casting any reflections on the great people I now serve, more suited to the purpose and more comfortable to one of my build than are the auxiliary craft of their vessel."

"Not at all, Glad to do a favor to a friend."

"You are gracious, Mr. Under Secretary."

"Well, what did they say?"

Dr. Ftaeml shrugged his whole body. "It pains me to inform you that they are unmoved. They insist that their she child be returned to them without delay."

Mr. Kiku frowned. "No doubt you explained that we don't have their missing child, have never heard of it, have no reason to think

that she has ever been on this planet and strong reason to believe that she never could have been?"

"I did. You will pardon my inurbanity if I translate their answer in terms crude but unmistakable." He shrugged apologetically. "They say you are lying."

Mr. Kiku took no offense, being aware that a Rargyllian when acting as go-between was as impersonal as a telephone. "It would be better if I *were* lying. Then I could hand over their brat and the matter would be finished."

"*I* believe you," Dr. Ftaeml said suddenly.

"Thank you. Why?"

"You used the subjunctive."

"Oh. Did you tell them that there were over seven thousand varieties of non-terrestrial creatures on Earth, represented by some hundreds of thousands of individuals? That of these individuals some thirty thousand are sentient beings? But of these sentient beings only a very few have anything like the physical characteristics of your Hroshii? And that all those few we can account for as to race and planet of origin?"

"I am Rargyllian, sir. I told them all that and more, in their own language, putting it more clearly than you could explain it to another Earthmen. I made it live."

"I believe you." Mr. Kiku tapped the table top. "Do you have a suggestion?"

"Just a moment," put in Greenberg. "Don't you have a picture of a typical Hroshii? It might help."

"'Hroshiu,'" corrected Ftaeml. "Or, in this ease, 'Hroshia.' I am sorry. They do not use symbology of the picture type. Unfortunately I am not equipped to take one of your pictures."

"An eyeless race?"

"No, Excellency. Their sight is quite good, quite subtle. But their eyes and nervous systems abstract somewhat differently from yours. Their analog of 'picture' would be meaningless to you. Even I find it difficult and my race is admitted to be the most subtle of all in the interpretation of symbolic abstraction. If a Rargyllian…" He stopped and preened himself.

"Well…describe one to us. Use your justly famed semantic talents."

"A pleasure. The Hroshii manning this vessel are all about of a size, being of the military class…"

Mr. Kiku interrupted. "Military class? Doctor, is this a war vessel? You did not tell me this."

Dr. Ftaeml looked pained. "I considered the fact both obvious and distasteful."

"I suppose so." Mr. Kiku wondered if he should alert the Federation General Staff. Not now, he decided. Mr. Kiku was strongly prejudiced against the introduction of military might into negotiations, since he believed that a show of force not only was an

admission of failure on the part of diplomats but also poisoned the chances of accomplishing anything more by negotiation. He could rationalize this opinion but he held it as an emotion. “Go on, please.”

“The military class are of three sexes, the differences in the types being not readily apparent and need not concern us. My shipmates and hosts are perhaps six inches higher than this table and half again your height in length. Each has four pairs of legs and two arms. Their hands are small and supple and extremely dexterous. In my opinion the Hroshii are unusually beautiful, form serving function with rare grace. They are remarkably adroit with machines, instruments, and delicate manipulations of every sort.”

Greenberg relaxed a little as Ftaeml talked. Despite everything, the vagrant notion had still been bothering him that this creature “Lummox” might be of the Hroshii…but he saw now that the thought came from nothing more than accidental similarity in leg number…as if an ostrich were a man because of two legs! His mind wanted to file Lummox into a category and no doubt would keep on trying, but this category did not fit.

Dr. Ftaeml was continuing: “…but the outstanding characteristic of the Hroshii, not covered by these mere facts of size, shape, body structure, and mechanical function, is an overwhelming impression of great mental power. So overwhelming, in fact…” The medusoid chuckled in embarrassment“…that I was almost persuaded to waive my professional fee and serve them as a privilege.”

Greenberg was impressed. These Hroshii really must have something; the Rargyllians, honest brokers though they were, would let a man die of thirst rather than tell him the local word for water, unless cash was in band. Their mercenary attitude had the quality of devoutness.

“The only thing,” Ftaeml added, “that saved me from this excess was the knowledge that in one thing I excelled them. They are not linguists. Rich and powerful as their own speech is, it is the only language they ever learn well. They are even less talented linguistically than is your own race.” Ftaeml spread his grotesque hands in a gesture that was purely Gallic (or a perfect, studied imitation) and added, “So I repaired my self esteem and charged twice my usual fee.”

He ceased talking. Mr. Kiku stared glumly at the table and Greenberg merely waited. Finally Kiku said, “What do you suggest?”

“My esteemed friend, there is only one course that is of any use. The Hroshia they seek must be delivered up.”

“But we do not have this Hroshia.”

Ftaeml simulated a human sigh. “That is regrettable.” Greenberg looked at him sharply; the sigh did not carry conviction. He felt that Ftaeml regarded the impasse as somehow tremendously exciting…which was ridiculous; a Rargyllian, having accepted the role of go-between, was invariably anxious that the negotiation be successful;

anything less than success caused. them to lose face in their own eyes.

So he spoke up. “Dr. Ftaeml, when you undertook this commission for the Hroshii, did you expect that we would be able to produce this, uh, Hroshia?”

The creature’s tendrils suddenly slumped; Greenberg cocked an eyebrow and said dryly, “No, I see that you did not. May I ask why, then, you accepted this commission?”

Ftaeml answered slowly and without his usual confidence: “Sir, one does not refuse a commission of the Hroshii. Believe me, one does not.”

“Hmm…these Hroshii. Doctor, will you pardon me if I say that you have not yet conveyed to me a full understanding of these people? You tell us that they are mentally very powerful, so much so that a leading mind of a highly-advanced race…yourself…is almost ‘overwhelmed’ by them. You imply that they are powerful in other ways…that you, a member of a proud, free race, must obey their wishes. Now here they are in a single ship, facing an entire planet, a planet so powerful that it has been able to create hegemony more extensive than any before in this portion of space…yet you say that it would be ‘regrettable’ if we were not to satisfy their impossible demand.”

“All that is true,” Ftaeml answered carefully.

“When a Rargyllian speaks professionally I cannot disbelieve him. Yet this I have trouble believing. These superbeings…why have we never heard of them?”

“Space is deep, Excellency.”

“Yes, yes. No doubt there are thousands of great races that we of Earth have never met, will never meet. Am I to infer that this is also the first contact of your race with the Hroshii?”

“No. We have long known of them…longer than we have known of you,”

“Eh?” Greenberg glanced sharply at Mr. Kiku. He went on, “What are the relations of Rargyll with the Hroshii? And why has not this been reported to the Federation?”

“Excellency, is that last question a rebuke? If so, I must answer that I am not acting for my government.”

“No,” Greenberg assured him, “it was a simple inquiry. The Federation always seeks to extend its diplomatic linkage as far as possible. I was surprised to learn that your race, which claims friendship with ours, could know of a mighty civilization and not make that fact known to the Federation.”

“May I say, Excellency, that I am surprised at your surprise? Space is deep…and my race have long been great travelers. Perhaps the Federation has not asked the right questions? As for the other, my people have no diplomatic relations, no relations of any sort, with the mighty Hroshii. They are a people who, as you say, mind their own business, and we are very happy to (as you would phrase it)…to stay

out of their yard. It has been years, more than five of your centuries, since the last time a Hroshij ship appeared in our skies and demanded service from us. It is better so."

Greenberg said, "I seem to be getting more confused the more I know. They stopped at Rargyll to pick up an interpreter instead of coming straight here?"

"Not precisely. They appeared in our skies and asked if we had ever heard of you people. We answered that we knew you…for when the Hroshii ask, they are answered! We identified your star and I had the unsought honor to be chosen to represent them." He shrugged. "Here I am. Let me add that it was not until we were deep in space that I learned the object of their search."

Greenberg had made note earlier of a loose end. "Just a moment. They retained you, they started for Earth, then told you that they were searching for a missing Hroshia. It must have been then that you decided that this mission would fail. Why?"

"Is it not evident? We Rargyllians, in your lovely and precise idiom, are the greatest gossips in space. Perhaps you would say 'historians' but I mean something more lively than that. Gossips. We go everywhere, we know everyone, we speak all languages. I did not need to 'check the files' to know that men of Earth had never been to the capital planet of the Hroshii. Had you made such contact you would have forced your attentions on them and started a war. It would have been a 'scandal to the jaybirds'…a lovely phrase, that; I must see a jaybird while I am here. It would have been discussed with many a fine anecdote wherever two Rargyllians got together. So I knew that they must be mistaken; they would not find what they sought."

"In other words," Greenberg answered, "you people identified the wrong planet…and wished this problem on us."

"Please," protested Dr. Ftaeml. "Our identification was perfect, I assure you—not of your planet, for the Hroshii did not know where you came from—but of you yourself. The creatures they wished to locate were men of Earth, in every possible detail—down to your fingernails, your internal organs."

"Yet you knew they were mistaken. Doctor, I am not the semantician you are. I seem to see a contradiction…or a paradox."

"Permit me to explain. We who deal professionally in words know how cheap words are. A paradox can exist only in words, never in the facts behind the words. Since the Hroshii described exactly the men of Earth and since I knew that the men of Earth knew not the Hroshii, I concluded what I must conclude—that there is another race in this galaxy as like to your race as twin Sornia in their shell—as two peas in the pod. Peas? You like beans better?"

"'Peas' is the correct idiom," Mr. Kiku answered soberly.

"Thank you. Your language is rich; I must refresh myself of it while I am here. Would you believe it?…the man from whom I first learned it intentionally taught me idioms unacceptable in your polite

society. For example ‘as cold as…’”

“Yes, yes,” Mr. Kiku said hastily. “I can believe it. Some of our compatriots have an odd sense of humor. You concluded that there is somewhere in this star cloud a race so like ours as to be our twin brothers? I find that notion statistically unlikely to the point of impossibility.”

“The entire universe, Mr. Under Secretary, is wildly unlikely to the point of ridiculousness. Therefore, we of Rargyll know that God is a humorist.” The medusoid made a gesture peculiar to his breed, then politely repeated it in idiom by making one of the most common Earthly gestures of reverence.

“You explained this conclusion to your clients?”

“I did…and I repeated it most carefully in my lastest consultation. The result was foreseeable.”

“Yes?”

“Each race has its talent, each its weakness. The Hroshii, once having with mighty intellect arrived at an opinion, are not easily swayed. ‘Pig-headed’ is your precise term.”

“Pig-headedness breeds pig-headedness, Dr. Ftaeml.”

“Please, my dear sir! I hope that you will not be so tempted. Let me report, if I must, that you have been unable to find their treasured one, but that you are instituting new and more thorough searches. I am your friend…do not admit that this negotiation has failed.”

“I never broke off a negotiation in my life,” Mr. Kiku answered sourly. “If you can’t outargue the other fellow, sometimes you can outlive him. But I do not see what more we have to offer them. Except for that one possibility we spoke of last time…did you bring the coordinates of their planet? Or did they refuse?”

“I have them. I told you that they would not refuse; the Hroshii are not in the least afraid of having other races know where to find them…they are merely indifferent” Dr. Ftaeml opened a brief case which was either an imitation of a terrestrial one, or might have been purchased on Earth. “Nevertheless it was not easy. The where-and-when had to be translated from their concepts to those using Rargyll as the true center of the universe, for which purpose it required that I first convince them of the necessity, then explain to them spacetime units as used on Rargyll. Now, since I must shame myself by admitting that I am not skilled in your methods of reckoning the shape of the universe, it is necessary that I have help in translating our figures into yours.”

“No need to feel shamefaced,” Mr. Kiku answered, “for I don’t know anything about our astrogation methods myself. We use specialists for that sort of thing. Just a moment.” He touched an ornamental knob on the conference table. “Get me BuAstro.”

“They’ve all gone home for the day,” a disembodied female voice answered, “except the astrogation duty officer.”

“Then that’s who I want. Hurry it up.”

Very shortly a male voice said, “Dr. Warner, night duty officer.”

“Kiku here. Doctor, you solve space-time correlations?”

“Of course, sir.”

“Can you do it from Rargyllian data?”

“Rargyllian?” The duty officer whistled softly. “That’s a tough one, sir. Dr. Singh is the man for that”

“Get him up here, right away.”

“Uh, why, he’s gone home, sir. He’ll be here in the morning.”

“I didn’t ask where he was; I said, ‘Get him up here…right away.’ Use police alarm and general call, if necessary. I want him *now*.”

“Er…yes, sir.”

Mr. Kiku turned back to Dr. Ftaeml. “I expect to be able to show that no terrestrial starship ever visited the Hroshii. Fortunately we do have astrogation records for every interstellar trip. My thought is this: it is time that the principals met face to face in this negotiation. With your skillful interpretation we can show them that we have nothing to hide, that the facilities of our civilization are at their disposal, and that we would like to help them find their missing sibling…but that she is not here. Then, if they have any thing to suggest, we will…” Mr. Kiku broke off as a door at the end of the room opened. He said tonelessly, “How do you do, Mr. Secretary?”

The Most Honorable Mr. Roy MacClure, Secretary for Spatial Affairs for the Federated Community of Civilizations, was entering. His eye seemed to light only on Mr. Kiku. “There you are, Henry! Been looking all over. That stupid girl didn’t know where you had gone, but I found that you had not left the building. You must…”

Mr. Kiku took him firmly by the elbow and said loudly, “Mr. Secretary, allow me to present Dr. Ftaeml, Ambassador *de facto* of the mighty Hroshii.”

Mr. MacClure met the occasion. “How do you do, Doctor? Or should I say ‘Excellency’?” He had the grace not to stare.

“‘Doctor’ will do nicely, Mr. Secretary. I am well, thank you. May I enquire as to your health?”

“Oh, good enough, good enough…if everything didn’t pop at once. Which reminds me…can you spare me my chief assistant? I’m awfully sorry but something urgent has come up.”

“Certainly, Mr. Secretary. Your pleasure is my greatest wish.”

Mr. MacClure looked sharply at the medusoid but found himself unable to read his expression…if the thing had expressions, he amended. “Uh, I trust you are being well taken care of, Doctor?”

“Yes, thank you.”

“Good. I really am sorry, but… Henry, if you please?”

Mr. Kiku bowed to the Rargyllian, then left the table while wearing an expression so masklike that Greenberg shivered. Kiku spoke in a whisper to MacClure as soon as they were away from the table.

MacClure glanced back at the other two, then answered in a whisper that Greenberg could catch. “Yes, yes! But this is crucially

important, I tell you. Henry, what in the world possessed you to ground those ships without consulting me first?"

Mr. Kiku's reply was inaudible. MacClure went on, "Nonsense! Well, you will just have to come out and face them. You can't…"

Mr. Kiku turned back abruptly. "Dr. Ftaeml, was it your intention to return to the Hroshii ship tonight?"

"There is no hurry. I am at your service, sir."

"You are most gracious. May I leave you in Mr. Greenberg's care? We speak as one."

The Rargyllian bowed. "I shall count it an honor."

"I look forward to the pleasure of your company tomorrow."

Dr. Ftaeml bowed again. "Until tomorrow. Mr. Secretary, Mr. Under Secretary…your servant."

The two left. Greenberg did not know whether to laugh or cry; he felt embarrassed for his whole race. The medusoid was watching him silently.

Greenberg grinned with half his mouth and said, "Doctor, does the Rargyllian tongue include swear words?"

"Sir, I can use profanity in more than a thousand tongues…some having curses that will addle an egg at a thousand paces. May I teach you some of them?"

Greenberg sat back and laughed heartily. "Doctor, I like you. I really like you…quite aside from our mutual professional duty to be civil."

Ftaeml shaped his lips in a good imitation of a human smile. "Thank you, sir. The feeling is mutual…and gratifying. May I say without offense that the reception given my sort on your great planet is sometimes something that one must be philosophical about?"

"I know. I'm sorry. My own people, most of them, are honestly convinced that the prejudices of their native village were ordained by the Almighty. I wish it were different."

"You need not be ashamed. Believe me, sir, that is the one conviction which is shared by all races everywhere…the only thing we all have in common. I do not except my own race. If you knew languages… All languages carry in them a portrait of their users and the idioms of every language say over and over again, 'He is a stranger and therefore a barbarian.'"

Greenberg grinned wryly. "Discouraging, isn't it?"

"Discouraging? Why, sir? It is sidesplitting. It is the only joke that God ever repeats, because its humor never grows stale." The medusoid added, "What is your wish, sir? Are we to continue to explore this matter? Or is your purpose merely to stretch the palaver until the return of your…associate?"

Greenberg knew that the Rargyllian was saying as politely as possible that Greenberg could not act without Kiku. Greenberg decided that there was no sense in pretending otherwise…and besides, he was hungry. "Haven't we worked enough today, Doctor? Would you do me the honor of having dinner with me?"

"I would be delighted! But…you know our peculiarities of diet?"

"Certainly. Remember, I spent some weeks with one of your compatriots. We can go to the Hotel Universal."

"Yes, of course." Dr. Ftaeml seemed unenthusiastic.

"Unless there is something you would like better?"

"I have heard of your restaurants with entertainment…would it be possible? Or is it…?"

"A night club?" Greenberg thought. "Yes! The Club Cosmic. Their kitchen can do anything the Universal can."

They were about to leave when a door dilated and a slender, swarthy man stuck his head in. "Oh. Excuse me. I thought Mr. Kiku was here."

Greenberg remembered suddenly that the boss had summoned a relativity mathematician. "Just a moment You must be Dr. Singh."

"Yes."

"Sorry. Mr. Kiku had to leave, I am here for him."

He introduced the two and explained the problem. Dr. Singh looked over the Rargyllian's scroll and nodded. "This will take a while."

"May I help you, Doctor?" asked Ftaeml.

"It won't be necessary. Your notes are quite complete." Thus assured, Greenberg and Ftaeml went out on the town.

The floor show at the Club Cosmic included a juggler, which delighted Ftaeml, and girls, which delighted Greenberg. It was late by the time Greenberg left Ftaeml in one of the special suites reserved for non-human guests of DepSpace at Hotel Universal. Greenberg was yawning as he came down the lift, but decided that the evening had been worth while in the interest of good foreign relations.

Tired though he was, he stopped by the department. Dr. Ftaeml had spilled one item during the evening that he thought the boss should know…tonight if he could reach him, or leave it on his desk if not. The Rargyllian, in an excess of pleasure over the juggler, had expressed regret that such things must so soon cease to be.

"What do you mean?" Greenberg had asked.

"When mighty Earth is volatilized…" the medusoid had begun, then stopped.

Greenberg had pressed him about it. But the Rargyllian insisted that he had been joking.

Greenberg doubted if it meant anything. But Rargyllian humor was usually much more subtle; he decided to tell the boss about it as quickly as possible. Maybe that strange ship needed a shot of paralysis frequencies, a "nutcracker" bomb, and a dose of vacuum.

The night guard at the door stopped him. "Mr. Greenberg…the Under Secretary has been looking for you for the past half hour."

He thanked the guard and hurried upstairs. Mr. Kiku he found bent over his desk; the incoming basket was clogged as always but the Under Secretary was paying no attention. He glanced up and said

quietly, “Good evening, Sergei. Look at this.” He passed over a report.

It was Dr. Singh’s rework of Dr. Ftaeml’s notes. Greenberg picked out at the bottom the geocentric coordinates and did a quick sum. “Over nine hundred light-years!” he commented. “And out in that direction, too. No wonder we’ve never encountered them. Not exactly next door neighbors, eh?”

“Never mind that,” Mr. Kiku admonished. “Not the date. This computation is the Hroshii’s claim as to when and where they were visited by one of our ships.”

Greenberg looked and felt his eyebrows crawl up toward his scalp. He turned to the answer machine and started to code an inquiry. “Don’t bother,” Kiku told him. “Your recollection is correct. The *Trail Blazer*. Second trip.”

“The *Trail Blazer*,” Greenberg repeated foolishly.

“Yes. We never knew where she went, so we couldn’t have guessed. But we know exactly *when* she went. It matches. Much simpler hypothesis than Dr. Ftaeml’s twin races.”

“Of course.” He looked at his boss. “Then it is-Lummox.”

“Yes, it’s Lummox.”

“But it *can’t* be Lummox. No hands. Stupid as a rabbit.”

“No, it can’t be. But it is.”

CHAPTER VII

"Mother Knows Best"

LUMMOX was not in the reservoir. He had got tired and had gone home. It had been necessary to tear a notch in the reservoir to get out comfortably, but he had damaged it no more than was needful. He did not care to have any arguments with John Thomas over such silly matters—not any more arguments, that is.

Several people made a fuss over his leaving, but he ignored them. He was careful not to step on anybody and their actions he treated with dignified reserve. Even when they turned loose hated spray things on him he did not let them herd him thereby, the way they had herded him out of that big building the day he had gone for a walk; he simply closed his eyes and his rows of nostrils, put his head down and slogged for home.

John Thomas met him on the way, having been fetched by the somewhat hysterical chief of safety. Lummox stopped and made a saddle for John Thomas, after mutual greetings and reassurances, then resumed his steady march homeward.

Chief Dreiser was almost incoherent. "Turn that brute around and head him back!" he screamed.

"You do it," Johnnie advised grimly.

"I'll have your hide for this! I'll—I'll—"

"What have *I* done?"

"You—It's what you haven't done. That beast broke out and—"

"I wasn't even there," John Thomas pointed out while Lummox continued plodding.

"Yes, but… That's got nothing to do with it! He's out now; it's up to you to assist the law and get him penned up again. John Stuart, you're getting in serious trouble."

"I don't see how you figure. You took him away from me. You got him condemned and you say he doesn't belong to me any longer. You tried to kill him…you know you did, without waiting to see if the government would okay it. If he belongs to me, I ought to sue you. If he doesn't belong to me, it's no skin off my nose if Lummox climbs out of that silly tank." John Thomas leaned over and looked down. "Why don't you climb into your car, Chief, instead of running along beside us and getting yourself winded?"

Chief Dreiser ungraciously accepted the advice and let his driver pick him up. By the time this was done he had somewhat recovered his balance. He leaned out and said, "John Stuart, I won't bandy

words with you. What I have or have not done hasn't anything to do with the case. Citizens are required to assist peace officers when necessary. I am demanding officially—and I've got this car's recorder going while I ask it—that you assist me in returning that beast to the reservoir."

John Thomas looked innocent. "Then can I go home?"

"Huh? Of course."

"Thanks, Chief. Uh, how long do you figure he will stay in the reservoir after I put him in it and go home? Or were you planning on hiring me in as a permanent member of your police force?"

Chief Dreiser gave up; Lummox went home.

Nevertheless Dreiser regarded it as only a temporary setback; the stubbornness that made him a good police officer did not desert him. He admitted to himself that the public was probably safer with the beast penned up at home while he figured out a surefire way to kill him. The order from the Under Secretary for Spatial Affairs, permitting him to destroy Lummox arrived and that made Dreiser feel better…old Judge O'Farrell had been pretty sarcastic about his jumping the gun.

The cancellation of that order and the amended order postponing Lummox's death indefinitely never reached him. A new clerk in the communications office of DepSpace made a slight error, simply a transposition of two symbols; the cancellation went to Pluto…and the amended order, being keyed to the cancellation, followed it.

So Dreiser sat in his office with the death order clutched in his hand and thought about ways to kill the beast Electrocution? Maybe…but he could not even guess at how much of a jolt it would take to do it. Cut his throat like butchering a hog? The Chief had serious doubts about what sort of knife to use and what the brute would be doing in the meantime.

Firearms and explosives were no good. Wait a minute! Get the monster to open its mouth, wide, then shoot straight down its throat, using an explosive charge that would blow his innards to bits. Kill him instantly—yes, sir! Lots of animals had armor—turtles, rhinos, armadillos, and things—but always outside, not inside. This brute was no exception; Chief Dreiser had had several looks down inside that big mouth the time he had tried poison. The beast might be armor plate outside; inside he was pink and moist and soft like everybody else.

Now let's see; he'd have the Stuart boy tell the brute to hold its mouth open and…no, that wouldn't do. The boy would see what was up and like as not would order the beast to charge…and then some cops' widows would draw pensions. That boy was going bad, no doubt of it…funny how a good boy could take a wrong turn and wind up in prison.

No, the thing to do was to get the kid downtown on some excuse and carry out the order while he wasn't around. They could entice the brute into saying "ah!" by offering him food…"tossing it to

him," Dreiser amended.

He glanced at his clock. Today? No, he wanted to choose the weapon and then rehearse everybody so that it would go like clockwork. Tomorrow early…better have the boy picked up right after breakfast.

Lummox seemed contented to be home, ready to let bygones be bygones. He never said a word about Chief Dreiser and, if he realized that anyone had tried to harm him, he did not mention it. His naturally sunny disposition displayed itself by wanting to put his head in Johnnie's lap for cuddling. It had been a long time since his head was small enough for this; he merely placed the end of his muzzle on the boy's thigh, carrying the weight himself, while Johnnie stroked his nose with a brickbat.

Johnnie was happy only on one side. With the return of Lummox he felt much better, but he knew that nothing had been settled; presently Chief Dreiser would again try to kill Lummox. What to do about it was an endless ache in his middle.

His mother had added to his unhappiness by raising a loud squawk when she saw "that beast!" returned to the Stuart home. John Thomas had ignored her demands, threats, and orders and had gone ahead stabling his friend and feeding and watering him; after a while she had stormed back into the house, saying that she was going to phone Chief Dreiser. Johnnie had expected that and was fairly sure that nothing would come of it…and nothing did; his mother remained in the house. But Johnnie brooded about it; he had a life-long habit of getting along with his mother, deferring to her, obeying her. Bucking her was even more distressing to him than it was to her. Every time his father had left (including the time his ship had not come back) he had told Johnnie, "Take care of your mother, son. Don't cause her any trouble."

Well, he had *tried*…he really had! But it was sure that Dad had never expected Mum to try to get rid of Lummox. Mum ought to know better; she had married Dad knowing that Lummox was part of the package. Well, hadn't she?

Betty would never switch sides like that.

Or would she?

Women were very strange creatures. Maybe he and Lum ought to bach it together and not take chances. He continued to brood until evening, spending his time with the star beast and petting him. Lummie's tumors were another worry. One of them seemed very tender and about to burst; John Thomas wondered if it ought to be lanced? But no one knew any more about it than he did and he did not know.

On top of everything else, here Lummie was ill…it was just too much!

He did not go in to dinner. Presently his mother came out with a tray. "I thought you might like to picnic out here with Lummox," she

said blandly.

Johnnie looked at her sharply. “Why, thanks, Mum…uh, thanks.”

“How is Lummie?”

“Uh, he’s all right, I guess.”

“That’s good.”

He stared after her as she went in. Mum angry was bad enough, but Mum with that secret, catlike look, all sweetness and light, he was even more wary of. Nevertheless he polished off the excellent dinner, not having eaten since breakfast. She came out again a half hour later and said, “Finished, dear?”

“Uh, yes…thanks, it was good.”

“Thank you, dear. Will you bring the tray in? And come in yourself; there is a Mr. Perkins coming to see you at eight.”

“Mr. Perkins? Who’s he?” But the door was closing behind her.

He found his mother downstairs, resting and knitting socks. She smiled and said, “Well? How are we now?”

“All right. Say, Mum, who is this Perkins? Why does he want to see *me?*”

“He phoned this afternoon for an appointment. I told him to come at eight.”

“But didn’t he say what he wanted?”

“Well…perhaps he did, but mother thinks it is better for Mr. Perkins to explain his errand himself.”

“Is it about Lummox?”

“Don’t cross-examine Mum. You’ll know quickly enough.”

“But, look here, I…”

“We’ll say no more about it, do you mind? Take off your shoe, dear. I want to measure for the foot.”

Baffled, he started to remove his shoe. Suddenly he stopped. “Mum, I wish you wouldn’t knit socks for me.”

“What, dear? But mother enjoys doing it for you.”

“Yes, but… Look, I don’t *like* hand-knit socks. They make creases on the soles of my feet… I’ve showed you often enough!”

“Don’t be silly! How could soft wool do your feet any harm? And think what you would have to pay for real wool, real handwork, if you bought it. Most boys would be grateful.”

“But I don’t *like* it, I tell you!”

She sighed. “Sometimes, dear, I don’t know what to do with you, I really don’t.” She rolled up her knitting and put it aside. “Go wash your hands…yes, and your face, too…and comb your hair. Mr. Perkins will be here any moment.”

“Say, about this Mr. Perkins…”

“Hurry, dear. Don’t make things difficult for mother.”

Mr. Perkins turned out to be pleasant; John Thomas liked him despite his suspicions. After a few polite inanities, with coffee served for ritual hospitality, he came to the point.

He represented the Exotic Life Laboratory of the Museum of Natural History. As a result of the news picture of Lummox in

connection with the story of the trial the beast had come to the attention of the Museum…which now wanted to buy him.

"To my surprise," he added, "in searching the files I discovered that on another occasion the Museum attempted to buy this specimen…from your grandfather, I believe. The name was the same as yours and the date fitted. Are you any relation to…"

"My great great great grandfather…sure," John Thomas interrupted. "And it was probably my grandfather they tried to buy Lummox from. But he was not for sale then—and he's not for sale now!"

His mother looked up from knitting and said, "Be reasonable, dear. You are in no position to take that attitude."

John Thomas looked stubborn. Mr. Perkins went on with a warm smile, "I sympathize with your feelings, Mr. Stuart. But our legal department looked into the matter before I came out here and I am familiar with your present problems. Believe me, I'm not here to make them worse; we have a solution that will protect your pet and clear up your troubles."

"I'm not going to sell Lummox," John Thomas persisted.

"Why not? If it turns out to be the only solution?"

"Well…because I can't. Even if I wanted to. He wasn't left to me to sell, he was left to me to keep and take care of. He was in this family before I was…before my mother was, for that matter." He looked sternly at his mother. "Mum, I don't know what's gotten into you."

She answered quietly, "That will be enough of that, dear. Mother does what is best for you."

Mr. Perkins changed the subject smoothly as John Thomas began to cloud up. "In any case, now that I've come all this way, may I see the creature? I'm terribly interested."

"Uh, I suppose so." Johnnie got up slowly and led the stranger outside.

Mr. Perkins looked up at Lummox, took a deep breath and let it out. "Marvelous!" He walked around him, admiring. "Absolutely marvelous! Unique…and the biggest e.-t. specimen I've ever seen. How in the world was he shipped?"

"Why, he's grown some," John Thomas admitted.

"I understand he parrots human speech a bit. Can you coax him to do it?"

"Huh? He doesn't 'parrot'…he *talks*."

"Really?"

"Of course. Hey, Lummie, how are you, boy?"

"I'm all right," Lummox piped. "What does *he* want?"

"Oh, nothing, nothing. He just wanted to see you."

Mr. Perkins stared. "He talks! Mr. Stuart, the laboratory *must* have this specimen."

"That's out, I told you."

"I'm prepared to go much higher, now that I've seen him…and

heard him."

John Thomas started to say something rude, checked himself and said instead, "Look, Mr. Perkins, are you married?"

"Why, yes. Why?"

"Any kids?"

"One, a little girl. She's just five." His face softened.

"I'll make you a deal. We'll swap even. No questions asked and each of us does as he likes with his 'specimen.'"

Perkins started to flare up, then suddenly grinned. "Touché! I'll shut up. But," he went on, "you were taking a chance. One or two of my colleagues would have taken you up. You can't understand what a temptation a specimen like this is to a man of science. Really." He looked longingly at Lummox and added, "Shall we go in?"

Mrs. Stuart looked up as they came in; Mr. Perkins shook his head briefly. They sat down and Mr. Perkins fitted his finger tips together. "Mr. Stuart, you have forbidden me to discuss a possible sale, but if I tell the director of the Lab that I didn't even put the proposition, I will look foolish. Would you let me state what the museum has in mind…just for the record?"

"Well…" John Thomas frowned. "I guess there's no harm in that."

"Thanks. I must do something to justify my travel expenses. Let me analyze the situation. That creature…your friend Lummox…or let's say 'our friend Lummox' for I liked him as soon as I saw him. Our friend Lummox is under sentence of death, isn't he? A court order."

"Yes," John Thomas admitted. "But it hasn't been confirmed by the Space Department yet."

"I know. But the police have already made attempts to kill him, without waiting for final approval. Right?"

John started to use bad language, then glanced at his mother and refrained. "The stupid idiots! Anyhow, they can't kill Lummox; they're too dumb."

"I agree with your sentiments…privately. That buffoon chief of police ought to have his commission taken away. Why, he might have destroyed an absolutely unique specimen. Imagine!"

Mrs. Stuart said crisply, "Chief Dreiser is a fine gentleman."

Mr. Perkins turned to her and said, "Mrs. Stuart, I did not mean to cast slurs on a friend of yours. But I stick by my guns; the Chief had no right to take things into his own hands. Such behavior is worse on the part of a public official than it is when done by a lay citizen."

"He had public safety to think about," she insisted.

"True. Perhaps that is an extenuating circumstance. I take back my remarks. They are off the subject and I did not intend to start an argument."

"I'm glad to hear you did not, Mr. Perkins. Shall we get back to the subject?"

John Thomas felt himself warming a little to the scientist—Mum had slapped Perkins down just the way she did him—and, besides, he liked Lummox. Mr. Perkins continued, "Any time now, tomorrow, or even today, the Department of Spatial Affairs will approve the destruction of Lummox and…"

"Maybe they'll turn it down."

"Can you risk Lummox's life on that unjustified hope? The Chief of Police will show up again—and this time he'll kill Lummox."

"No, he won't! He doesn't know how. We'll laugh at him!"

Mr. Perkins shook his head slowly. "That's not your head talking, that's your heart. The Chief will make sure this time. He's been made to look silly; he won't let it happen again. If he can't figure out a sure way himself, he'll get expert advice. Mr. Stuart, any biologist could run a rough analysis on Lummox and tell almost offhand two or three certain ways to kill him…kill him quickly and safely. I've already thought of one, just from seeing him."

John Thomas looked at him in alarm. "You won't tell Chief Dreiser?"

"Of course not! I'd be strung up by the thumbs first But there are thousands of others who can advise him. Or he may hit on a method himself. Be sure of this: if you wait until that death sentence is approved, it will be too late. They'll kill Lummox. And that would be a great pity."

John Thomas did not answer. Mr. Perkins added quietly, "You can't oppose the forces of society singlehanded. If you are stubborn you yourself will make certain that Lummox will be killed."

John Thomas pushed his fist hard against his mouth. Then he said almost inaudibly, "What can I *do?*"

"Much, if you let me help you. First, let me make this clear. If you entrust your pet to us, he will never be harmed in any way. You hear talk about vivisection and such…well, forget it. Our object is to put specimens into environments as much like their home planets as possible, then study them. We want them to be healthy and happy, and we go to a lot of trouble to accomplish those ends. Eventually Lummox will die a natural death…then we'll mount the hide and skeleton, as a permanent exhibit."

"How would you like to be stuffed and exhibited?" Johnnie asked bitterly.

"Eh?" Perkins looked surprised, then laughed. "It wouldn't bother me at all; I'm leaving my carcass to the medical school of my alma mater. And it won't bother Lummox. The point is to get him out of the clutches of the police…so that he can live to a ripe old age."

"Wait a minute. If you buy him, that doesn't get him off. They'll still kill him. Won't they?"

"Yes and no. Mostly no. Selling him to the Museum doesn't cancel the order to destroy him, but, believe me, it will never be carried out. I've been coached by our legal department as to what to

do. First, we agree on terms and you give me a bill of sale; that gives the Museum legal standing. At once, tonight, I get hold of your local judge and get a temporary order postponing the execution for a few days; it is definitely within his discretion to postpone it while this new factor of a change in ownership is considered. That's all we need. We can get straight to the Secretary for Spatial Affairs if we need to…and I promise you that, once the Museum holds title, Lummox will never be destroyed."

"You're *sure?*"

"Sure enough to risk the Museum's money. If I'm wrong, I might be out of a job." Perkins grinned. "But I'm not wrong. Once I have the temporary order and have phoned the Museum to get busy on a permanent order my next step is to settle all the damage. I'll carry cash, enough to do it…cash has a convincing effect. That done, we'll have only the Chief of Safety against us…and, while he may seem an obstacle to you, he will never be able to stand up against the weight that the Museum can bring to bear, when needed. And everybody lives happily ever after!" Perkins smiled. "Anything wrong with it?"

John Thomas traced out a pattern on the rug with his toe, then looked up. "Look, Mr. Perkins, I know I have to do something to save Lummox. But up to now I haven't seen any way…and I guess I haven't had the courage to look the facts in the face."

"Then you'll do it?"

"Just a minute, please! This isn't any good either. Lummie would be miserable with loneliness. He'd never get used to it. It would just be swapping death for life imprisonment. I'm not sure but what he'd rather be dead…than to be all alone, with a lot of strangers and them poking him and bothering him and making tests of him. But I can't even ask him what he wants because I'm not sure Lummie understands about death. But he does understand about strangers."

Mr. Perkins chewed his lip and reflected that it was very hard to do this young man a favor. "Mr. Stuart? If you were to go with Lummox, would it make a difference?"

"Huh? How?"

"I think I can promise you a job as an animal handler… In fact I have a vacancy in my own department; I could hire you tonight and we could sort the red tape later. After all, there is a real advantage in having an exotic animal cared for by someone who knows his ways."

Before Johnnie could answer his mother said, "No!"

"Eh? What, Mrs. Stuart?"

"Out of the question. Mr. Perkins, I had hoped that you would provide a rational way out of this silly unpleasantness. But I cannot agree to that last suggestion. My son is to go to college. I will not have him waste his life sweeping out that beast's cage…like a roustabout! No indeed!"

"Now look here, Mother…"

"John Thomas! If you please! The subject is closed."

Mr. Perkins looked from the boy's smoldering face to his mother's set expression. "After all," he said, "that is no business of the Museum. Let me put it this way, Mrs. Stuart. I'll keep that job open for, oh, say six months…no, please, Mrs. Stuart! Whether or not your son takes it is your problem…and I am sure you don't need my advice. I just want to assure your son that the Museum won't keep him away from his pet. Is that fair?"

Her needles were clicking like machinery. "I suppose so," she admitted.

"Mr. Stuart?"

"Wait a minute. Mother, you don't think I'd…"

"Please, Mr. Stuart! The Museum of Natural History has no place in a family discussion. You know our offer. Will you accept?"

Mrs. Stuart interrupted. "I don't believe you mentioned the price, Mr. Perkins."

"Why, so I didn't! Shall we say twenty thousand?"

"Net?"

"Net? Oh, no…subject to the claims we'll have to settle, of course."

"'Net,' Mr. Perkins," she said firmly.

He shrugged. "Net."

"We accept."

"Good."

"Hey, wait a minute!" protested John Thomas. "We don't either. Not if this other thing isn't settled. I'm not going to turn Lummox over to…"

"Quiet! Dear, I've been patient but we'll have no more of this nonsense. Mr. Perkins, he accepts. Do you have the papers with you?"

"We don't either accept!"

"Just a moment," Mr. Perkins appealed. "Ma'am, am I correct in thinking that I must have your son's signature for a valid bill of sale?"

"You'll get it."

"Hmm. Mr. Stuart?"

"I'm not going to sign unless it's settled that Lummox and I stay together."

"Mrs. Stuart?"

"This is ridiculous."

"I think so, too. But there is nothing I can do." Perkins stood up. "Good night, Mr. Stuart. Thanks for letting me speak my piece—and for letting me see Lummox. No, don't get up; I can find the door."

He started to leave, while the Stuarts were busy not looking at each other. He paused at the door. "Mr. Stuart?"

"Huh? Yes, Mr. Perkins?"

"Would you do me a favor? Get as many pictures of Lummox as possible? Color-stereo-motion-sound if you can. I would have a professional crew flown here but there may not be time. You know.

It would be a shame indeed if there were not some scientific record left of him. So do what you can." He turned away again.

John Thomas gulped and was up out of his chair. "Mr. Perkins! Hey! Come back."

A few minutes later he found himself, signing a bill of sale. His signature was shaky but legible. "Now Mrs. Stuart," Mr. Perkins said smoothly, "if you will sign underneath, where it says 'Guardian'… thanks! Oh yes! I must scratch out that part about 'subject to settlement of claim.' I don't have the cash with me; I got here after the banks had closed, so I'll pass over a nominal sum to bind it and we'll settle the rest before we move the specimen."

"No," said John Thomas.

"Eh?"

"I forgot to tell you. The Museum can settle the claims, since I can't and after all Lummox did it. But I'm not going to take any money. I'd feel like Judas."

His mother said sharply, "John Thomas! I won't let you…"

"Better not say it, Mum," he said dangerously. "You know what Dad would have thought."

"Hrrumph!" Mr. Perkins cleared his throat loudly. "I'm going to fill in the usual legal fiction of a nominal sum. I won't stay longer; Judge O'Farrell told me that he goes to bed at ten. Mrs. Stuart, I consider the Museum bound by my offer. Mr. Stuart, I'll leave you to settle with your mother in your own way. Good night all!" He shoved the bill of sale in his pocket and left quickly.

An hour later they were still facing each other wearily and angrily across the living room. John Thomas had let himself be bullied into conceding that his mother could take the money, as long as he was not required to touch it. He had given this in exchange, he thought, for permission to accept the job with Lummox.

But she shook her head. "Quite out of the question. After all, you are about to go to college. You couldn't take that beast along. So you had no reason to expect to keep him with you anyhow."

"Huh? But I thought you had meant to take care of him…the way you promised Dad…and I would have seen him on week ends."

"Keep your father out of this! I might as well tell you right now that I made up my mind long ago that the day you went away to school this household would cease to be a zoo. This present mix-up has simply moved up the date a few days."

He stared at her, unable to answer.

Presently she came over and put a hand on his shoulder. "Johnnie? Johnnie dear…"

"Huh?"

"Look at me, darling. We've had some bitter words and I'm sorry they were ever spoken… I'm sure you did not mean them. But Mum has only been thinking of your welfare, you know that? Don't you?"

"Uh, I suppose so."

"That's all Mum ever thinks about…what's best for her big boy.

You're young, and when a person is young, things seem important that aren't. But as you grow older, you will find that Mum knew best. Don't you see that?"

"Well… Mum, about that job. If I could only…"

"Please, dear. Mother has a splitting headache. We'll say no more about it now. Get a good night's sleep and tomorrow you'll see things differently." She patted his cheek, bent down and kissed him. "Good night, dear."

"G'night."

He sat there long after she had gone up, trying to figure things out. He knew that he should feel good…he'd saved Lummie; hadn't he?

But he did not feel good; he felt like an animal that has chewed a leg off to escape a trap…shock and misery, not relief.

At last he got up and went outside to see Lummox.

CHAPTER VIII

The Sensible Thing To Do

JOHN THOMAS stayed with Lummox a short time only, as he could not bear to tell him the truth and there was nothing else to talk about. Lummox sensed his distress and asked questions; at last John Thomas pulled himself together and said, "There's nothing wrong I tell you! Shut up and go to sleep. And be darn sure you stay in the yard, or I'll beat you bow-legged."

"Yes, Johnnie. I don't like it outside anyway. People did funny things."

"Just remember that and don't do it again."

"I won't Johnnie. Cross my heart."

John Thomas went in and up to bed. But he did not go to sleep. After a while he got up, dressed in part, and went up to the attic. The house was very old and had a real garret, reached by a ladder and scuttle hole in an upper hallway closet. Once there had been a proper staircase but it had been squeezed out when the landing flat was built on the roof, as the space had been needed for the lazy lift.

But the attic was still there and it was John Thomas's only private place. His room his mother "tidied" sometimes, even though it was his duty (and wish) to do it himself. Anything might happen when Mum tidied. Papers might be lost, destroyed, or even read, for Mum believed that there should be no secrets between parents and children.

So anything he wanted to keep to himself he kept in the attic; Mum never went there—ladders made her dizzy. He had a small, almost airless and very dirty room there which he was supposed to use only for "storage." Its actual uses were varied: he had raised snakes there some years before; there he kept the small collection of books which every boy comes by but does not discuss with parents; he even had a telephone there, an audio extension run from the usual sound & sight instrument in his bedroom. This last was a practical result of his high-school course in physics and it had been real work to wire it, as it not only had to be rigged when Mum was out of the house and in such a way that she would not notice it but also it had to be done so as not to advertise its presence to the phone company's technicians.

But it worked, jury-rigged though it was, and he had added a "servant" circuit which flashed a warning light if anyone was listening from any other instrument in the house.

Tonight he had no wish to call anyone and it was past the hour when direct messages were permitted at the dormitory where Betty lived. He simply wanted to be alone…and to look over some papers he had not looked at in a long time. He fumbled under his work table, flipped a toggle; a panel opened in what appeared to be blank wall. In the cupboard thus exposed were books and papers. He took them out.

One item was a thin-paper notebook, his great grandfather's diary of the *Trail Blazer*'s second voyage of exploration. It was more than a hundred years old and showed the wear of many hands. John Thomas had read it a dozen times; he supposed that his father and his grandfather had done the same. All the pages were fragile, many had been repaired.

He thumbed through it, turned the pages carefully, but browsing rather than reading. His eye lit on one remembered item:

> *"…some of the lads are panicky, especially the married men. But they should of thought of it before they signed up. Everybody knows the score now; we burst through and came out somewhere not close to home. Who cares? We meant to travel, didn't we?"*

John Thomas turned a few more pages. He had always known the story of the *Trail Blazer*; it produced in him neither awe nor wonder. One of the first interstellar ships, her crew had plied the profession of discovery with the same acceptance of the unknown that bad marked the golden days of the fifteenth century, when men had braved uncharted seas in wooden vessels. The *Trail Blazer* and her sisters had gone out the same way, burst through. the Einstein barrier, taken their chances on getting back. John Thomas Stuart VIII had been aboard her that second voyage, had come home in one piece, married, begat a male child, and settled down…it was he who had built the landing flat on the roof.

Then one night he had heard the call of the wild goose, signed up again. He had not come back.

John Thomas located the first mention of Lummox:

> *"This planet is a fair imitation of good old Terra, which is a relief after the last three, since we can hit dirt without suiting up. But evolution must have been playing double-or-nothing here, instead of the four-limbed arrangement considered stylish at home practically everything here has at least eight legs…'mice' that look like centipedes, rabbitlike creatures with six short legs and one pair of tremendous jumping legs, all sorts up to things as big as giraffes. I caught one little fellow (if you can call it that…fact is, he came up and crawled into my lap) and I was so taken with him that I am going to try to keep him as a mascot. He puts me in mind of a dachshund puppy,*

only better engineered. Cristy had the airlock watch, so I was able to get him aboard without turning him over to Biology."

The next day's entry did not mention Lummox, being concerned with a more serious matter:

"We hit the jackpot this time… Civilization. The officers are, so excited they are almost off their heads. I've seen one of the dominant race at a distance. The same multi-legged pattern, but otherwise making you wonder what would have happened to Earth if the dinosaurs had made good."

Still further on…:

"I've been wondering what to feed Cuddlepup. I needn't have worried. He likes everything I've sneaked out of the mess for him…but he will eat anything that is not riveted down. Today he ate my Everlasting stylus and it has me worried. I don't suppose the ink cartridge will poison him but how about the metal and plastic? He's just like a baby; everything he can reach goes in his mouth.

"Cuddlepuppy gets cuter every day. The little tyke seems to be trying to talk; he whines at me and I whine back at him. Then he crawls into my lap and tells me that he loves me, plain as anything. I'll be switched if I'll let Biology have him, even if they catch me. Those birds would likely as not cut him up just to see what makes him tick. He trusts me and I'm not going to let him down."

The diary skipped a couple of days; the *Trail Blazer* had made an emergency raise-ship and Assistant Power man J. T. Stuart had been too busy to write. John Thomas knew why…the negotiations opened so hopefully with the dominant race had failed…no one knew why.

The captain fled to save his ship and his crew. They had blasted away and had again broken through the Einstein barrier without obtaining from the sentient race the astronomical data they had hoped to get.

There were only a few more entries concerning Lummox-Cuddlepup; John Thomas put the diary aside, finding that reading about Lummox was more than he could stand. He started to put everything back into his hideaway; his hand fell on a small, privately-printed book titled A FEW NOTES ABOUT MY FAMILY. It had been written by his grandfather. John Thomas Stuart IX, and Johnnie's father had brought it up to date before he had gone on his last patrol. It belonged in the family library, beside the massive official biography of John Thomas Stuart VI, but Johnnie had sneaked it upstairs and his mother had never missed it. He knew it as well as he knew the diary, but he started thumbing through it to get his mind off Lummox.

The record started in 1880, with John Thomas Stuart. Who his people had been nobody knew, as he had come from a little Illinois town that kept no birth records in that remote day. He himself had confused the record beyond recovery by running away to sea at fourteen. He had sailed the China trade, lived through beatings and bad food, and eventually had 'swallowed the anchor,' a retired sea captain of the dying age of sail. He had built the old house John Thomas was in.

John Thomas, Junior, had not gone to sea. Instead he had killed himself flying a boxkite affair termed an "aeroplane." That had been before the first of the World Wars; for several years thereafter the house had. received "paying guests."

J. T. Stuart III had died to greater purpose; the submarine of which he was gunnery officer had penetrated Tsushima Straits to the Sea of Japan, but had failed to return.

John Thomas Stuart IV was killed on the first trip to the Moon.

John Thomas V had emigrated to Mars; his son, the famous name in the family, Johnnie skipped over quickly; he had long since grown tired of being reminded that he bore the same name as General Stuart, first governor of the Martian Commonwealth after the revolution. Johnnie wondered what would have happened to his great great great grandfather if the revolution had failed? Would they have hanged him?…instead of putting up statues of him?

Much of the book was devoted to an attempt by Johnnie's grandfather to clear the name of his own grandfather—for the son of General Stuart was no public hero; instead he had sweated out his last fifteen years of life in the Triton penal colony. His wife had returned to her family on Earth and taken back her maiden name, for herself and her son.

But her son had gone proudly into court the day he was of age and had had his name changed from "Carlton Gimmidge" to "John Thomas Stuart VIII." It was he who had fetched Lummox back and he had used his bonus money from the second trip of the *Trail Blazer* to buy back the old homestead. He had apparently impressed on his own son that his son's grandfather had gotten a dirty deal; the son had made a great point of it in this record.

Johnnie's grandfather could himself have used an advocate to defend his name. The record stated simply that John Thomas Stuart IX had resigned from the service and had never gone into space again, but Johnnie knew that it had been a choice of that or a court martial; his own father had told him…but he had told him also that his grandfather could have got off scot-free had he been willing to testify. His father had added, "Johnnie, I'd rather see you loyal to your friends than with your chest decked out in medals."

The old man had still been living at the time Johnnie's father told him this. On a later occasion, while Johnnie's father was out on patrol, Johnnie had tried to let him know that he knew.

Granddad had been furious. "Poppycock!" he had shouted.

“They had me dead to rights.”

“But Dad said your skipper was actually the one who…”

“Your Dad wasn’t there. Captain Dominic was the finest skipper that ever trod steel…may his soul rest in peace. Set up the checkers, son. I’m going to beat you.”

Johnnie had tried to get the straight of it after his grandfather died, but his father’s answer was not direct. “Your grandfather was a romantic sentimentalist, Johnnie. It’s the flaw in our make-up. Hardly sense enough in the whole line to balance a check book.” He had puffed his pipe and added, “But we do have fun.”

Johnnie put the books and papers away, feeling dully that it had not done him much good to read about his forebears; Lummox was still on his mind. He guessed he ought to go down and try to get some sleep.

He was turning away as the phone flashed; he grabbed it before the light could change to sound signal; he did not want his mother to wake. “Yes?”

“That you, Johnnie?”

“Yeah. I can’t see you, Betty; I’m up in the attic.”

“That isn’t the only reason you can’t. I haven’t got my face on, so I’ve got the video switched off. Besides it’s pitch dark in this hallway, since I’m not allowed to phone this time o’ night. Uh, the Duchess isn’t listening, is she?”

Johnnie glanced at his warning signal. “No.”

“I’ll make this brief. My spies report that Deacon Dreiser got the okay to go ahead.”

“No!”

“Yes. Point is, what do we do about it? We can’t sit still and let him.”

“Uh, I’ve done something.”

“What? Nothing silly, I hope. I shouldn’t have been away today.”

“Well, a Mr. Perkins…”

“Perkins? The chap who went to see Judge O’Farrell tonight?”

“Yes. How did you know?”

“Look, don’t waste time. I always know. Tell me your end.”

“Well…” John Thomas gave a confused report. Betty listened without comment, which made him defensive; he found himself expounding the viewpoints of his mother and of Mr. Perkins, rather than his own. “So that’s how it was,” he finished lamely.

“So you told them to go climb a tree? Good, Now here is our next move. If the Museum. can do it, we can do it. It’s just a case of getting Grandpa O’Farrell to…”

“Betty, you don’t understand. I sold Lummox.”

“What? You *sold* Lummox?”

“Yes. I had to. If I didn’t…”

“*You* sold *Lummox*.”

“Betty, I couldn’t help my…”

But she had switched off on him.

He tried to call back, got a recorded voice that said, “This instrument is out of direct service until tomorrow morning at eight. If you wish to record a message stand by for…” He switched off.

He sat holding his head and wishing he were dead. The worst of it was, Betty was right. He had let himself be badgered into doing something he *knew* was wrong, just because it had seemed that there was nothing else he could do.

Betty had not been fooled. Maybe what she wanted to try wasn’t any good either…but she had known a wrong answer when she heard it.

He sat there, flailing himself but not knowing what to do. The more he thought, the angrier he got. He had let himself be talked into something that wasn’t *right*…just because it was reasonable…just because it was logical…just because it was common sense.

The deuce with common sense! His ancestors hadn’t used common sense, any of ’em! Who was he to start such a practice?

None of them had ever done the sensible thing. Why, take his great great great grandfather…he’d found a situation he hadn’t liked and he had turned a whole planet upside down through seven bloody years. Sure, they called him a hero…but does starting a revolution come under the head of common sense?

Or take… Oh, shucks, take any of ’em! There hadn’t been a “good” boy in the bunch. Would granddad have sold Lummox? Why, granddad would have torn down the courthouse with his bare hands. If granddad was here, he’d be standing guard over Lummox with a gun and daring the world to touch one spine.

He certainly wasn’t going to take any of Perkins’ dirty money; he knew that.

But what could he *do?*

He could go to Mars. Under the Lafayette Law he was a citizen and could claim land. But how could he get there? Worse, how could he get Lummox there?

The trouble with that, he told himself savagely, is that it almost makes sense. And sense is no use to me.

At last he hit on a plan. It had the one virtue of having no sense to it at all; it was compounded of equal parts of folly and of risk. He felt that granddad would have liked it.

CHAPTER IX

Customs and an Ugly Duckling

HE went down to the upper hallway and listened at his mother's door. He did not expect to hear anything as her bedroom was sound-proofed; the action was instinctive. Then he returned to his own room and made rapid preparations, starting by dressing in camping clothes and mountain boots. His sleeping bag he kept in a drawer of his desk; he got it out, tucked it in a side pocket of his coat and shoved its power pack in a breast pocket. Other items of hiking and camping gear he distributed among other pockets and he was almost ready to go.

He counted his cash and swore softly; his other assets were in a savings account and now he would have no chance to draw from it. Well, it couldn't be helped…he started downstairs, then remembered an important matter. He went back to his desk.

"*Dear Mum*," he wrote. "*Please tell Mr. Perkins that the deal is off. You can use my college money to pay back the insurance people. Lummie and I are going away and it won't do any good to try to find us. I'm sorry but we have to*." He looked at the note, decided that there was no more to be said, added "*love*," and signed it.

He started a note to Betty, tore it up, tried again, and finally told himself that he would send her a letter when he had more to say. He went downstairs, left the note on the dining table, then went to the pantry and picked out supplies. A few minutes later, carrying a large sack crammed with tins and packages, he went out to Lummox's house.

His friend was asleep. The watchman eye accepted him; Lummox did not stir. John Thomas hauled back and kicked him as hard as possible. "Hey, Lum! Wake up."

The beast opened his other eyes, yawned daintily, and piped, "Hello, Johnnie."

"Pull yourself together. We're going for a hike."

Lummox extended his legs and stood up, letting a ripple run from head to stern. "All right."

"Make me a seat—and leave room for this." Johnnie held up the bag of groceries. Lummox complied without comment; John Thomas chucked the sack up on the beast, then scrambled up himself. Soon they were on the road in front of the Stuart home.

Almost irrational as he was, John Thomas nevertheless knew that

running away and hiding Lummox was a project almost impossible; Lummox anywhere would be about as conspicuous as a bass drum in a bathtub. However there was a modicum of method in his madness; concealing Lummox near Westville was not quite the impossibility it would have been some places.

Westville lay in an open mountain valley; immediately west the backbone of the continent shoved its gaunt ridges into the sky. A few miles beyond the city commenced one of the great primitive areas, thousands of square miles of up-and-down country almost the same as it had been when the Indians greeted Columbus. During a short season each year it swarmed with red-coated sportsmen, blazing away at deer and elk and each other; most of the year it was deserted.

If he could get Lummox there without being seen, it was barely possible that they could avoid being caught—until his food supplies ran out. When that time came—well, he might live off the country just as Lummox would…eat venison, maybe. Or maybe go back to town without Lummox and argue it out again from the strong position of being able to refuse to tell where Lummox was until they listened to reason. The possibilities were not thought out; he simply intended to get Lummox under cover and then think about it…get him somewhere where that old scoundrel Dreiser couldn't try out ways to hurt him!

John Thomas could have turned Lummox to the west and set off across country toward the mountains, Lummox being no more dependent on pavement than is a tank…but Lummox left a track in soft earth as conspicuous as that of a tank. It was necessary to. stay on paved road.

Johnnie had a solution in mind. In an earlier century a transcontinental highway had crossed the mountains here, passing south of Westville and winding ever higher toward the Great Divide. It had long since been replaced by a modern powered road which tunneled through the wall of rock instead of climbing it. But the old road remained, abandoned, overgrown in many places, its concrete slabs heaved and tilted from frost and summer heat…but still a paved road that would show little sign of Lummox's ponderous progress.

He led Lummox by back ways, avoiding houses and working toward a spot three miles west where the expressway entered the first of its tunnels and the old highway started to climb. Ht did not go quite to the fork, but stopped a hundred yards short, parked Lummox in front of a vacant lot, warned him not to move, and scouted the lay of the land. He did not dare take Lummox onto the expressway to reach the old road; not only might they be seen but also it would be dangerous to Lummox.

But John Thomas found what he thought he remembered: a construction road looping around the junction. It was not paved but was hard-packed granite gravel and he judged that even Lummox's heavy steps would not leave prints. He went back and found

Lummox placidly eating a “For Sale” sign. He scolded him and took it away, then decided that he might as well get rid of the evidence and gave it back. They continued while Lummox munched the sign.

Once on the old highway John Thomas relaxed. For the first few miles it was in good repair, for it served homes farther up the canyon. But there was no through traffic, it being a dead end, and no local traffic at this hour. Once or twice an air car passed overhead, party or theater goers returning home, but if the passengers noticed the great beast plodding on the road below they gave no sign.

The road meandered up the canyon and came out on a tableland; here was a barrier across the pavement: ROAD CLOSED… VEHICULAR PASSAGE FORBIDDEN BEYOND THIS POINT. Johnnie got down and looked it over. It was a single heavy timber supported at the chest height. “Lummie, can you walk over that without touching it?”

“Sure, Johnnie.”

“All right. Take it slowly. You mustn’t knock it down. Don’t even brush against it.”

“I won’t, Johnnie.” Nor did he. Instead of stepping over it as a horse might step over a lower barrier Lummox retracted pairs of legs in succession and flowed over it.

Johnnie crawled under the barrier and joined him. “I didn’t know you could do that.”

“Neither did I.”

The road was rough ahead. Johnnie stopped to lash down the groceries with a line under Lummox’s keel, then added a bight across his own thighs. “All right, Lummie. Let’s have some speed. But don’t gallop; I don’t want to fall off.”

“Hang on, Johnnie!” Lummox picked up speed, retaining. his normal foot pattern. He rumbled along at a fast trot, his gait smoothed out by his many legs. Johnnie found that he was very tired, both in body and spirit. He felt safe, now that they were away from houses and traveled roads, and fatigue hit him. He leaned back and Lummox adjusted his contours to him. The swaying motion and steady pounding of massive feet had soothing effect. Presently he slept.

Lummox went on surefootedly over the broken slabs, He was using his night sight and there was no danger of stumbling in the dark. He knew that Johnnie was asleep and kept his gait as smooth as possible. But in time he got bored and decided on a nap, too. He had not slept well the nights he had spent away from home…always some silliness going on and it had fretted him not to know where Johnnie was. So now he rigged out his guardian eye, closed his others and shifted control over to the secondary brain back in his rump. Lummox proper went to sleep, leaving that minor fraction that never slept to perform the simple tasks of watching for road hazards and of supervising the tireless pounding of his eight great legs.

John Thomas woke as the stars were fading in the morning sky. He stretched his sore muscles and shivered, There were high

mountains all around and the road crawled along the side of one, with a sheer drop to a stream far below. He sat up. “Hey, Lummie!”

No answer. He shouted again. This time Lummox answered sleepily, “What’s the matter, Johnnie?”

“You’ve been asleep,” he accused.

“You didn’t say not to, Johnnie.”

“Well…all right. Are we on the same road?”

Lummox consulted his alter ego and answered. “Sure. Did you want another road?”

“No. But we’ve got to get off this one. It’s getting light.”

“Why?”

John Thomas did not know how to answer that question; trying to explain to Lummox that he was under sentence of death and must hide did not appeal to him. “We have to, that’s why. But just keep going now. I’ll let you know.”

The stream climbed up to meet them; in a mile or so the road lay only a few feet above it. They came to a place where the stream bed widened out into a boulder field, with water only in a central channel. “Whoa!” called out Johnnie.

“Breakfast?” inquired Lummox.

“Not yet. See those rocks down there?”

“Yes.”

“I want you to step wide onto those rocks. Don’t put your big feet on that soft shoulder dirt. Step from the pavement to the rocks. Get me?”

“Don’t leave tracks?” Lummox asked doubtfully.

“That’s right. If anybody comes along and sees tracks, you’ll have to go back downtown again—because they’ll follow the tracks and find us. See?”

“I won’t leave any tracks, Johnnie.”

Lummox went down onto the dry stream bed like a gargantuan inchworm. The maneuver caused John Thomas to grab for his safety line with one hand and for his supplies with the other. He yelped.

Lummox stopped and said, “You all right, Johnnie?”

“Yes. You just surprised me. Upstream now and stay on the rocks.” They followed the stream, found a place to cross, then followed it on the other side. It swung away from the road and soon they were several hundred yards from it. It was now almost broad daylight and John Thomas was beginning to worry about air reconnaissance, even though it was unlikely that the alarm would be out so soon.

Up ahead a grove of lodgepole pines came down to the bank. It seemed dense enough; even if Lummox were not invisible in it, nevertheless holding still he would look like a big, mountain-country boulder. It would have to do; there was no time to pick a better place. “Up the bank and into those trees, Lum, and don’t, break the bank down. Step easy.”

They entered the grove and stopped; Johnnie dismounted.

Lummox tore down a branch of pine and started to eat. It reminded John Thomas that he himself had not eaten lately but he was so dead tired that he was not hungry. He wanted to sleep, really sleep…not half awake and clutching a safety line.

But he was afraid that if he let Lummox graze while he slept the big stupid lunk would wander into the open and be spotted. "Lummie? Let's take a nap before we have breakfast."

"Why?"

"Well, Johnnie's awful tired. You just lie down here and I'll put my sleeping bag beside you. Then when we wake up, we'll eat."

"Not eat until you wake up?"

"That's it."

"Well…all right," Lummox said regretfully.

John Thomas took his sleeping bag out of his picket, flipped the light membrane open, and plugged in the power pack. He set the thermostat and switched it on, then while it heated he inflated the mattress side. The thin mountain air made it heavy work; he stopped with it only partly blown up and peeled off all his clothes. Shivering in the frosty air he slid inside, closed it to a nose hole. "G'night, Lummie."

"G'night, Johnnie."

Mr. Kiku slept badly and was up early. He breakfasted without disturbing his wife and went to the Spatial Affairs hall, arriving while the great building was quiet except for the handful on night duty. Seated at his desk, he tried to think.

His subconscious had been nagging him all night, telling him that he had missed something important. Mr. Kiku had high respect for his subconscious, holding a theory that real thinking was never done at the top of the mind, which he regarded merely as a display window for results arrived at elsewhere, like the "answer" windows in a calculator.

Something young Greenberg had said…something about the Rargyllian believing that the Hroshii, with only one ship, were a serious menace to Earth. Mr. Kiku had discounted it as a clumsy attempt by the snake boy to bluff from weakness. Not that it mattered; the negotiation was about over…the one remaining detail being to set up permanent relations with the Hroshii.

His subconscious had not thought so.

He leaned to his desk and spoke to the night communications supervisor. "Kiku. Call the Hotel Universal. There's a Dr. Ftaeml there, a Rargyllian. As soon as he orders breakfast I want to talk a him. No, don't wake him, a man is entitled to his rest."

Having done what could be done, he turned to the mind-soothing routine of clearing up accumulated work.

His incoming basket was empty for the first time in some days and the building was beginning to stir when his desk communicator showed a blinking red light.

"Kiku here."

"Sir," the face said anxiously, "on that call to Hotel Universal. Dr. Ftaeml did not order breakfast."

"Sleeping late perhaps. His privilege."

"No, sir. I mean he skipped breakfast. He's on his way to space port."

"How long ago?"

"Five to ten minutes. I just found out."

"Very well. Call space port, tell them not to clear his ship. Make certain that they understand that it has diplomatic clearance and that they must actually do something…not just scratch its clearance on the board and go back to sleep. Then reach Dr. Ftaeml himself—my compliments to the Doctor and will he do me the honor of waiting a few minutes to see me? I am on my way to the port."

"Yes, sir!"

"That done, there is a matter of a special efficiency report for you…uh, Znedov, is it? Make out the form and grade yourself; I want to see your opinion of yourself."

"Yes, sir."

Mr. Kiku switched off and called Transportation. "Kiku. I am leaving for the space port as quickly as I can reach the roof. Provide a dart and a police escort."

"Yes, *sir!*"

Mr. Kiku stopped only to tell his secretary where he was going, then stepped into his private lift to the roof.

At the space port Dr. Ftaeml was waiting out on the passengers' promenade, watching the ships and pretending to smoke a cigar. Mr. Kiku came up and bowed. "Good morning, Doctor. It was most gentle of you to wait for me."

The Rargyllian tossed the cigar aside. "The honor is mine, sir. To be attended at the port by a person of your rank and pressing duties…" He finished with a shrug which expressed both surprise and pleasure.

"I will not keep you long. But I had promised myself the pleasure of seeing you today and I had not known that you intended to leave."

"My fault, Mr. Under Secretary I had intended to pop up and pop back and then to wait your pleasure this afternoon."

"Good. Well, perhaps by tomorrow I shall be able to present an acceptable solution of this problem."

Ftaeml was plainly surprised. "Successful?"

"I hope so. The data you provided yesterday has given us a new clue."

"Do I understand that you have *found* the missing Hroshia?"

"Possibly. Do you know the fable of the Ugly Duckling?"

"'Ugly Duckling'?" The Rargyllian seemed to be searching his files. "Yes, I know the idiom."

"Mr. Greenberg, following the clue you provided, has gone to fetch the Ugly Duckling. If by wild chance it turns out to be the swan

that we are seeking, then…" Mr. Kiku gave a shrug unconsciously like that of Ftaeml.

The Rargyllian seemed to have trouble believing it. "And is it the…'swan,' Mr. Under Secretary?"

"We will see. Logic says that it must be; probability says that it cannot be."

"Mmmm…and may I report this to my clients?"

"Suppose we wait until I hear from Mr. Greenberg. He has left Capital, to investigate. Can I reach you through the scout ship?"

"Certainly, sir."

"Uh, Doctor…there was one more thing."

"Yes, sir?"

"You made an odd remark to. Mr. Greenberg last night… supposedly a joke…or perhaps an accident. You said something about Earth being 'volatilized'."

For a moment the Rargyllian said nothing. When he did speak he changed the subject "Tell me, sir, in what way does logic state that your 'Ugly Duckling' is a swan?"

Mr. Kiku spoke carefully. "A Terran ship visited a strange planet at the time defined by your data. The dominant race could have been Hroshii; the identification is not exact except as to time. A life form was removed and brought here. This being is still alive after more than one hundred twenty years; Mr. Greenberg has gone to fetch it for identification by your principals."

Dr. Ftaeml said softly, "It must be. I did not believe it but it *must* be." He went on, louder and quite cheerfully, "Sir, you have made me happy."

"Indeed?"

"Very. You have also made it possible for me to speak freely."

"You have always been free to speak, Doctor, so far as we were concerned. I do not know what instructions you have from your clients."

"They have placed no check on my tongue. But… You are aware, sir, that the customs of a race are implicit in its speech?"

"I have sometimes had cause to suspect so," Mr. Kiku answered dryly.

"To be sure. If you visited a friend in a hospital, knowing him to be dying, knowing that you could not help him, would you speak to him of his doom?"

"No. Not unless he brought up the subject."

"Precisely! Speaking to you and to Mr. Greenberg I was perforce bound by your customs."

"Dr. Ftaeml," Mr. Kiku said slowly, "let us be blunt. Am I to believe that you are convinced that this single foreign ship could do a serious damage to this planet, with its not inconsiderable defenses?"

"I will be blunt, sir. Should the Hroshii eventually conclude that, through the actions of this planet or some member of its culture, their

Hroshia had died or was forever lost, Earth would not be damaged; Earth would be destroyed."

"By this one ship?"

"Unassisted."

Mr. Kiku shook his head. "Doctor, I am sure that you are convinced of what you say. I am not. The extent and thoroughness of the defenses of this, the leading planet of the Federation, cannot possibly be known to you. But should they be so foolish they will learn that we have teeth."

Ftaeml looked sorrowful. "In all the many tongues of civilization I find no words to convince you. But believe me…anything that you could do against them would be as futile as throwing stones at one of your modern warships."

"We shall see. Or, fortunately, we shall not see. I do not like weapons, Doctor; they are the last resort of faulty diplomacy. Have you spoken to them of the willingness of the Federation to accept them into the Community of Civilizations?"

"I have had grave difficulty in explaining to them the nature of your offer."

"Are they, then, so hopelessly warlike?"

"They are not warlike at all. How can I put it? Are you warlike when you smash…strike…swat…yes, swat a fly? The Hroshii are practically immortal by your standards, and even by mine. They are so nearly invulnerable to all ordinary hazards that they tend to look down…how is your idiom?…'Olympian'…they look down on us from Olympian heights. They cannot see any purpose in relations with lesser races; therefore your proposal was not taken seriously, though, believe me, I put it."

"They sound stupid," Kiku answered sourly.

"Not true, sir. They evaluate your race and mine most exactly. They know that any culture possessing star travel has at least some minor skill in the physical arts. They know therefore that you will regard yourselves as powerful. For that reason they are even now contemplating a display of force, to convince you that you must forthwith deliver up their Hroshia…they think of this as being like a goad to a draft animal, a sign which he will be able to understand."

"Hmm… You know the nature of this demonstration?"

"I do. My trip this morning to their ship is to persuade them to wait. They intend to touch lightly the face of your satellite, leave on it an incandescent mark perhaps a thousand miles long, to convince you that they…uh…'ain't foolin'."

"I am not impressed. We could order a force of ships and make such a sign ourselves. Not that we would."

"Could you do it with one ship, in a matter of seconds, without fuss, from a distance of a quarter million miles?"

"You think they could?"

"I am sure of it, A minor demonstration. Mr. Under Secretary, there are novae in their part of the sky which were not accidents of

nature."

Mr. Kiku hesitated. If it all were true, then such a demonstration might serve his own needs by causing the Hroshii to show their hand. The loss of a few worthless lunar mountains would not matter…but it would be difficult to evacuate such an area of even the few who might be in it. "Have you told them that our Moon is inhabited?"

"It is not inhabited by their Hroshia, which is all that matters to them."

"Hmm… I suppose so. Doctor, could you suggest to them, first, that you may be about to find their Hroshia, and second, that their Hroshia may be somewhere on our satellite, which is why the search has taken so long?"

The Rargyllian simulated a wide human grin. "Sir, I salute you. I shall be happy to convey such a suggestion. I am sure there will be no demonstration of force."

"Good health, Doctor. I'll be in touch with you."

"Your good health, sir."

On his way back Mr. Kiku realized that he had felt not a single twinge in the presence of the medusoid…why, the blighter was rather likable, in a horrid way. Dr. Morgan was certainly an adroit hypnotherapist.

His work basket was choked as usual; he put the Hroshii out of mind and worked happily. Late that afternoon communications informed him that they were holding a circuit for Mr. Greenberg. "Put him on," Mr. Kiku said, feeling that at last the pieces were falling into place.

"Boss?" Greenberg began.

"Eh? Yes, Sergei. What the deuce are you looking upset about?"

"Because I'm wondering how I'm going to like it as a private in the Outer Legion."

"Quit trying to break it gently. What happened?"

"The bird has flown."

"Flown? Where?"

"I wish I knew. The most likely place is a forest preserve west of here."

"Then why are you wasting time telling me? Get in there and find it."

Greenberg sighed. "I knew you would say that. Look, boss, this haystack has over ten million acres in it, tall trees, tall mountains, and no roads. And the local police chief is there ahead of me, with all his own men and half the sheriffs deputies in the state. He's ordered them to kill on sight and has posted a reward for the ship making the kill."

"*What?*"

"Just what I said. Your authorization to carry out the judgment of the court came through; the cancellation of it got lost…how, I don't know. But the acting chief is an old relic with the soul of a file clerk;

he points to the order and won't budge…he won't even let me call them on police frequency. With our intervention withdrawn I haven't an ounce of authority to force him."

"You are accepting that, I suppose?" Mr. Kiku said bitterly. "Just waiting for it to blow up in your face?"

"Just about. I've got a call in for the mayor—he's out of town. Another for the governor—he's in a closed grand jury session. And another for the chief forest ranger…I think he's out after the reward. As soon as I, switch off I'm going to twist the arm of the acting chief until he sees the light and…"

"You should be doing that now."

"I won't dally. I called to suggest that you turn on heat from back there. I need help."

"You'll get it"

"Not just to reach the governor, not just to start a fresh intervention. Even after we reach this wild police chief and persuade him to call off his dogs I'll still need help. Ten million acres of mountains, boss…it means men and ships, lots of men, lots of ships. It's no job for one man with a brief case. Besides, I'm going to join the Outer Legion."

"We'll both join," Kiku said glumly. "All right, get on it. Move."

"It's been nice knowing you."

Mr. Kiku switched off, then moved very fast, initiating a fresh departmental intervention, sending an emergency-priority message to the state governor, another to the mayor of Westville, another to the Westville district court. Formal action completed, he sat for a few seconds, bracing himself for what he must do next…then went in to tell the Secretary that they must ask for help from the military authorities of the Federation.

CHAPTER X

The Cygnus Decision

WHEN John Thomas woke up he had trouble remembering where he was. The sleeping bag was toasty warm, he felt good, rested but lazy. Gradually the picture of where he was and why he was there built up and he poked his head out. The sun was high and it was pleasantly warm. Lummox was nearby. "Hi, Lummie."

"Hi, Johnnie. You slept a long time. You were noisy, too."

"Was I?" He crawled out and pulled his clothes on, switched off the sleeping bag. He folded it and turned to Lummox—and started. "What's *that?*"

Near Lummox's head, lying squashed out as if it had been stepped on, was a very dead grizzly bear…about a six-hundred-pound male. Blood had gushed from mouth and nostrils, then dried. Lummox glanced at it. "Breakfast," he explained.

John Thomas looked at it with distaste. "Not for me, it's not. Where did you get it?"

"I catched it," Lummox answered and simpered.

"Not 'catched it'…'caught it.'"

"But I did catch it. It tried to get in with you and I catched it."

"Well, all right. Thanks." John Thomas looked at the bear again, turned away and opened his food bag. He selected a can of ham and eggs, twisted off the top, and waited for it to heat.

Lummox took this as a signal that it was now all right for him to breakfast, too, which he did—first the bear, then a couple of small pine trees, a peck or so of gravel for crunchiness, and the empty container of John Thomas's breakfast. They went down to the stream afterwards, with Johnnie going first to search the sky; Lummox washed down his meal with a few hogsheads of clear mountain water. Johnnie knelt and drank, then washed his face and hands and wiped them on his shirt. Lummox asked, "What do we do now, Johnnie? Go for a walk? Catch things, maybe?"

"No," Johnnie denied. "We go back up in those trees and lie low until dark. You've got to pretend you're a rock." He went up the bank, Lummox followed. "Settle down," John Thomas ordered. "I want to look at those bumps."

Lummox did so; it brought the tumors down where his master could inspect them without stretching. Johnnie looked them over with increasing worry. They were larger and seemed to have lumps

and bumps inside; Johnnie tried to remember whether such a development was a sign of malignancy. The skin over them had stretched and thinned until it was hardly more than thick leather, not in the least like the rest of Lummox's armor. It was dry and hot to his touch. Johnnie kneaded the left one gently; Lummox pulled away.

"Is it that tender?" Johnnie asked anxiously.

"I can't *stand* it," Lummox protested. He extended his legs and walked over to a large pine tree, started rubbing the tumor against it.

"Hey!" said Johnnie. "Don't do that! You'll hurt yourself."

"But it *itches*." Lummox went on scratching.

John Thomas ran to him, intending to be firm. But just as he reached him the tumor split open. He watched in horror.

Something dark and wet and writhing emerged, caught on the ruptured skin, held there inchoate, then burst free to dangle and flop like a jungle snake from a branch. For an agonized moment all that Johnnie could think was that it was indeed something like that… some giant, parasitic worm eating its way out of its unlucky host. He thought with dumb self-blame that he had forced Lummie to climb over the mountains…when he was sick to death with *that*.

Lummox sighed and wiggled. "Gee!" he said with satisfaction. "That *feels* better!"

"Lummox! Are you all right?"

"Huh? Why shouldn't I be, Johnnie?"

"Why? Why, *that!*"

"What?" Lummox looked around; the strange growth bent forward and he glanced at it. "Oh, that…" he answered, dismissing the matter.

The end of the thing opened out like a blossoming flower…and Johnnie realized at last what it was.

Lummox had grown an arm.

The arm dried rapidly, lightened in color and seemed to firm. Lummox did not have much control over it yet, but John Thomas could begin to see its final form. It had two elbows, a distinct hand with thumbs on each side. There were five fingers, seven digits in all, and the middle finger was longer and fully flexible, like an elephant's trunk. The hand did not resemble a human hand much but there was no doubt that it was at least as useful—or would become so; at the moment the digits wiggled aimlessly.

Lummox let him examine it, but did not himself seem especially interested in the development; Lummox acted as if it were something he always did right after breakfast.

Johnnie said, "Let me have a look at the other bump," and walked around Lummox. The rightside tumor was still more bloated. When John Thomas touched it Lummox shrugged away and turned as if to rub it against the tree. "Hold it!" Johnnie called out. "Stand still."

"I've *got* to scratch."

“You might lame yourself for life. Hold still, I want to try something.” Lummox sulkily complied; Johnnie took out his belt knife and gently nicked the center of the swelling.

The nick spread and Lummox’s right arm came out almost in Johnnie’s face. He jumped back.

“Thanks, Johnnie!”

“Any time, any time.” He sheathed the knife and stared at the newborn arms, his face thoughtful.

He could not figure all the implications of Lummox’s unexpected acquisition of hands. But he did realize that it was going to change things a lot. In what way, he did not know. Perhaps Lummie would not need so much care after this. On the other hand he might have to be watched or he would be forever getting into things he shouldn’t. He remembered uneasily someone saying what a blessing it was cats did not have hands…well, Lummie had more curiosity than any cat.

But he felt without knowing why that such things were side issues; this was *important*.

In any case, he decided fiercely, this doesn’t change one thing: Chief Dreiser isn’t going to get another crack at him!

He searched the sky through the branches and wondered if they could be spotted. “Lum…”

“Yes, Johnnie?”

“Haul in your legs. It’s time to play like a rock.”

“Aw, let’s go for a walk, Johnnie.”

“We’ll go for a walk tonight. But until it gets dark I want you to stay put and hold still.”

“Aw, Johnnie!”

“Look, you don’t want to go downtown again, do you? All right, then, quit arguing.”

“Well, if you feel that way about it.” Lummox settled to the ground. John Thomas sat down, leaned against him, and thought.

Maybe there was a way in this for Lummie and him to make a living…in a carnival or something. E.-t.s were big stuff in carnivals; they couldn’t run without them—even though half of them were fakes—and Lummie wasn’t a fake. Probably he could learn to do tricks with his hands, play something or something. Maybe a circus was still better.

No, that wasn’t the thing for Lummie; crowds made him nervous. Uh, what could the two of them do to make a living?…after this mess with the authorities was straightened out, of course. A farm, maybe? Lummie would be better than a tractor and with hands he would be a farm hand, too. Maybe that was the ticket, even though he had never thought about farming.

In his mind’s eye he saw himself and Lummox growing great fields of grain…and hay…and vegetables and…unaware that he had fallen asleep.

He was awakened by a cracking noise and knew vaguely that he had heard several of them. He opened his eyes, looked around and

found that he was lying beside Lummox. The creature had not left the spot…but he was moving his arms. One arm flailed past Lummox's head, there was a blur and another crack…and a small aspen some distance away suddenly came down. Several others were down near it.

John Thomas scrambled to his feet. "Hey, stop that!"

Lummox stopped. "What's the matter, Johnnie?" he asked in a hurt voice. There was a pile of rocks in front of him; he was just reaching for one.

"Don't throw rocks at trees."

"But you do, Johnnie."

"Yes, but I don't ruin them. It's all right to eat trees, but don't just spoil them."

"I'll eat them. I was going to."

"All right." Johnnie looked around. It was dusk, they could start again in a few minutes. "Go ahead and have them for supper. Here, wait a minute." He examined Lummox's arms. They were the same color as the rest of him, and beginning to get armor hard. But the most striking change was that they were twice as thick as they had been at first—as big around as Johnnie's thighs. Most of the loose hide had sloughed off; Johnnie found that he could tear off the rest. "Okay. Chow time."

Lummox finished the aspens in the time it took John Thomas to prepare and eat his simple meal, and was ready to eat the empty container as a sweet. It was dark by then; they took to the road.

The second night was even less eventful than the first. It grew steadily colder as they wound even higher; presently Johnnie plugged the power pack of his sleeping bag into his suit. Shortly he was warm and drowsy. "Lum—if I go to sleep, call me when it starts to get light."

"Okay, Johnnie." Lummox stored the order in his after brain, just in case. Cold did not bother him, he was not conscious of it, as his body thermostat was more efficient than was Johnnie's—even more efficient than the one controlling the power pack.

John Thomas dozed and woke up and dozed. He was dozing when Lummox called him, just as the first rays brushed distant peaks. Johnnie sat up and began watching for a place to pull out and hide. Luck was against him; it was straight up on one side and the other side swung over a deep, dismal drop. As minutes wore away and it turned broad daylight he began to get panicky.

But there was nothing to do but plod ahead.

A stratoship passed in the distance. He could hear the thunderclap, but he could not see it; he could only hope that it was not scanning for him. A few minutes later, while searching all around, he spotted behind them a dot that he hoped was an eagle.

Very soon he was forced to admit that it was a single human in a flight harness. "Stop, Lummox! Pull over to the wall. You're a landslide."

"A landslide, Johnnie?"

"Shut up and do it!" Lummox shut up and did it. John Thomas slid down and hid behind Lummox's head, making himself small. He waited for the flier to pass over.

The flier did not pass, but swooped in a familiar shoot-the-works style and came in for a landing. Johnnie sighed with relief as Betty Sorenson landed on the spot he had just vacated. She called out, "Howdy, Lummie," then turned to Johnnie, put her hands on her hips and said, "Well! Aren't you a pretty sight! Running off without telling me!"

"Uh, I meant to, Slugger, I really did. But I didn't have a chance to… I'm sorry."

She dropped her fierce expression and smiled. "Never mind. I think better of you than I have in some time. At least you did *something*. Johnnie, I was afraid you were just a big lummox yourself—pushed around by anybody."

John Thomas decided not to argue, being too pleased to see her to take offense. "Uh…well, anyway, how did you manage to spot us?"

"Huh? Knothead, you've been gone two nights and you are still only a short flight from town…how could you expect not to be spotted?"

"Yes, but how did you know where to look?"

She shrugged. "The old rule: I thought like a mule and went where the mule would. I knew you would be along this road, so I started out at barely 'can-see' and swooped along it. And if you don't want to be caught in the next few minutes we had better boost out of here and get under cover. Come on! Lummie old boy, start your engines."

She put down a hand and Johnnie swung aboard; the procession started up. "I've been trying to get off the road," Johnnie explained nervously, "but we haven't come to a spot."

"I see. Well, hold your breath, 'cause around this bend is Adam-and-Eve Falls and we can get off the road just above them."

"Oh, is that where we are?"

"Yes." Betty leaned forward in a futile attempt to see around a rock shoulder ahead. So doing, she caught her first glimpse of Lummox's arms. She grabbed John Thomas. "Johnnie! There's a boa constrictor on Lummie!"

"What? Don't be silly. That's just his right arm."

"His *what?* Johnnie, you're ill."

"Level off and quit grabbing me. I said 'arms'—those tumor things were arms."

"The tumors…were arms?" She sighed. "I got up too early and I haven't had breakfast. I can't take shocks like that. All right, tell him to stop. I got to see this."

"How about getting under cover?"

"Oh. Yes, you're right You're usually right, Johnnie—two or

three weeks late."

"Don't strain yourself. There are the falls."

They passed the falls; the floor of the canyon thereby came up to meet them. John Thomas took the first chance to get off the road, a spot like their bivouac of the day before. He felt much better to have Lummox back under thick trees again. While he prepared breakfast, Betty examined Lummox's brand-new arms.

"Lummox," she said reprovingly, "you didn't tell mama about this."

"You didn't ask me," he objected.

"Excuses, always excuses. Well, what can you do with them?"

"I can throw rocks. Johnnie, is it all right?"

"No!" John Thomas said hastily. "Betty, how do you want your coffee?"

"Just bare-footed," she answered absently and went on inspecting the limbs. There was a notion hovering in her mind about them, but it would not light…which annoyed her, as she expected her mind to work for her with the humming precision of a calculator and no nonsense, please! Oh, well…breakfast first.

After they had fed the dirty dishes to Lummox, Betty lounged back and said to John Thomas, "Problem child, have you any idea what a storm you have stirred up?"

"Uh, I guess I've got Chief Dreiser's goat."

"No doubt and correct. But you might as well turn it loose; there won't be room in the pen."

"Mr. Perkins?"

"Right. Keep trying."

"Mum, of course."

"Of course. She alternates between weeping for her lost baby and announcing that you are no son of hers."

"Yeah. I know Mum," he admitted uneasily. "Well, I don't care… I knew they'd all be sore at me. But I had to."

"Of course you had to, Knothead darling, even though you did it with the eager grace of a hippopotamus. But I don't mean them."

"Huh?"

"Johnnie, there is a little town in Georgia named Adrian. It's too small to have a regular safety force, just a constable. Do you happen to know that constable's name?"

"Huh? Of course not."

"Too bad. For as near as I was able to find out, that constable is the only cop who isn't looking for you, which is why I rallied around —even though you, you dirty name, ran off without bothering to alert me."

"I told you I was sorry!"

"And I forgave you. I'll let you forget it in ten years or so."

"What's this nonsense about this constable? And why should everybody be out after me? Aside from Chief Dreiser, I mean?"

"Because he has put out a general alarm and offered a reward for

Lummie, alive or dead…preferably dead. They are serious about it, Johnnie…terribly serious. So whatever plan you had we now junk and shift to a good one. What did you have in mind? Or did you?"

John Thomas turned pale and answered slowly, "Well… I meant to keep on like this for a night or two, until we reached a place to hide."

She shook her head. "No good. In their stumbling official way they will have concluded by now that this is where you would head…since it is the only place near Westville where a creature the size of Lummox could possibly hide. And…"

"Oh, we'd get off the road!"

"Of course. And they will search this forest tree by tree. They really mean it, chum."

"You didn't let me finish. You know that old uranium mine? The Power and Glory? You go over Dead Wolf Pass and then take off north on a gravel road. That's where we're heading. I can put Lummox completely out of sight there; the main tunnel is big enough."

"Flashes of sense in that. But not good enough for what you are up against"

She was silent. Johnnie stirred uneasily and said, "Well? If that's no good, what do we do?"

"Pipe down. I'm thinking." She lay still, staring up at the deep blue mountain sky. At last she said, "You didn't solve anything by running away."

"No…but I sure mixed it up."

"Yes, and so far so good. Everything ought to be turned upside down occasionally; it lets in air and light. But now we've got to see that the pieces fall back where we want them. To do that we've got to gain time. Your notion of the Power and Glory Mine isn't too bad; it will do until I can make better arrangements."

"I don't see why they would ever find him there. It's about as lonely as you can get."

"Which is why it is sure to be searched. Oh, it might fool Deacon Dreiser; I doubt he could find his own hat without a search warrant. But he's dug up an air posse the size of a small army; they are certain to find you. You took your sleeping bag and food; therefore you are camping out. I found you, they will find you. I did it by knowing what makes you tick, whereas they have to work by logic, which is slower. But just as certain. They'll find you…and that's the end of Lummox. They won't take chances…bomb him, probably."

John Thomas considered the dismal prospect. "Then what's the sense of hiding him in the mine?"

"Just to gain a day or so, because I'm not ready to take him out yet."

"Huh?"

"Of course. We'll hide him in town."

"What? Slugger, the altitude has got you."

“In town and under cover…because it is the only place in the wide, wide world they won’t look for him.” She added, “Maybe in Mr. Ito’s greenhouses.”

“Huh? Now I know you’re crazy.”

“Can you think of a safer place? Mr. Ito’s son is not hard to reason with; I had a nice talk with him just yesterday. I stood short and looked up at him and let him explain things. One of his greenhouses would be perfect…snug, maybe, but this is an emergency. You can’t see through that milky glass they are built out of and nobody would dream that Lummie might be inside.”

“I don’t see how you can do it.”

“You let me handle it. If I don’t get the greenhouse…but I will!…then I’ll get an empty warehouse or something. We’ll put Lummie in the mine tonight, then I’ll fly back and arrange things. Tomorrow night Lummie and I will go back to town and…”

“Huh? It took us two nights to get this far—and it will take us most of tonight to get to the mine. You can’t ride him back in one night.”

“How fast can he go when he tries?”

“But nobody can ride him when he gallops. Not even me.”

“I won’t ride him; I’ll fly over him, pacing him and making him slow down for curves. Three hours, maybe?…and another hour to sneak him into the greenhouse.”

“Well…maybe it would work.”

“It will because it’s got to. Then you get caught”

“Huh? Why don’t I just go home?”

“No, that would be a giveaway. They catch you, you’ve been doing amateur uranium prospecting…I’ll fetch out a radiation counter. You don’t know where Lummox is; you kissed him goodbye and turned him loose, then came up here to forget your sorrows. You’ll have to be convincing…and don’t let them use a truth meter.”

“Yes, but… Look, Slugger, what’s the good? Lummie can’t stay in a greenhouse forever.”

“We’re simply buying time. They are ready to kill him on sight… and they will. So we keep him out of sight until we can change that.”

“I suppose I should have gone through with the sale to the Museum,” John Thomas answered miserably.

“No! Your instincts are sound, Johnnie, even though you’ve got less brains than a door knob. Look…do you remember the Cygnus Decision?”

“The Cygnus Decision? We had it in elementary Customs of Civilization?”

“Yes. Quote it.”

“What is this? A mid-semester quiz?” John Thomas frowned and dug into his memory. “‘Beings possessed of speech and manipulation must be presumed to be sentient and therefore to have innate human rights, unless conclusively proved otherwise.’” He sat up. “Hey! They can’t kill Lummox—he’s got hands!”

CHAPTER XI

“It’s Too Late, Johnnie”

“MIND your air speed,” she cautioned. “Do you know the old one about the man whose lawyer assured him that they could not put him in jail for *that?*”

“What was ‘that’?”

“Never mind. His client answered, ‘But, counsellor, I’m *speaking* from the jail.’ Point is, the Cygnus Decision is just theory; we’ve got to keep Lummox out of sight until we can get the court to change its mind.”

“Unh, I see. I guess you’re right.”

“I’m always right,” Betty admitted with dignity. “Johnnie, I’m dying of thirst; thinking is dry work. Did you bring any water up from the creek?”

“No, I didn’t.”

“Got a bucket?”

“Yeah, somewhere.” He felt in his pockets, found it and pulled it out. He stopped to blow it up to semi-rigidity, then said, “I’ll fetch it.”

“No, give it to me. I want to stretch my legs.”

“’Ware fliers!”

“Don’t teach your grandmother.” She took it and went down hill, keeping to the trees until she reached the bank. Johnnie watched her slim figure catching shafts of cathedral light among the pines and thought how pretty she was…very nearly as good a head on her as a man and pretty to boot. Aside from being bossy the way females always were, Slugger was all right.

She came back carrying the plastic bucket carefully. “Help yourself,” she offered.

“Go ahead.”

“I drank from the creek.”

“All right” He drank deeply. “You know, Betty, if you weren’t knock-kneed, you’d be pretty good-looking.”

“Who’s knock-kneed?”

“And there’s always your face, of course,” he went on pleasantly. “Aside from those two shortcomings you’re not—”

He did not finish—she dived and hit him low. The water went all down his front and partly on her. The scuffle continued until he got her right arm locked up behind her, holding her helpless. “Say ‘Pretty please’,” he advised.

“Darn you, Johnnie Stuart! ‘Pretty please.’”

“With sugar on it?”

“With sugar on it—and spit, too. Let me up.”

“All right.”

He got to his feet. She rolled to a sitting position, looked up at him and laughed. They were both dirty, scratched, and somewhat bruised and they both felt very fine indeed. Lummox had watched the mock fight with interest but no alarm, since Johnnie and Betty could never really be mad at each other. He commented, “Johnnie’s all wet.”

“He certainly is, Lummie—more ways than one.” She looked him over. “If I had two clothes pins, I’d hang you on a tree. By your ears, of course.”

“We’ll be dry in five minutes, a day like this.”

“I’m not wet, not through a flying suit. But you look like a dunked cat.”

“I don’t mind.” He lay down, found a pine needle and bit it. “Slugger, this is a swell place. I wish I didn’t have to go on up to the mine.”

“Tell you what—after we get this mess straightened out and before we start school, we’ll come back up here and camp a few days. We’ll bring Lummox, too—won’t we, Lummie?”

“Sure,” agreed Lummox. “Catch things. Throw rocks. Fun.”

John Thomas looked at her reprovingly. “And get me talked about all over town? No, thanks.”

“Don’t be prissy. We’re here now, aren’t we?”

“This is an emergency.”

“You and your nice-nice reputation!”

“Well, somebody ought to watch such things. Mum says that boys had to start worrying when girls quit. She says things used to be different”

“Of course they were—and they will be again. They run the whole program over and over again.” She looked thoughtful. “But, Johnnie, you pay too much attention to what your mother says.”

“I suppose so,” he admitted.

“You had better break yourself of it. Otherwise no girl is going to take a chance on marrying you.”

He grinned. “That’s my insurance policy.”

She dropped her eyes and blushed. “I wasn’t speaking for myself! I don’t want you—I’m just taking care of you for practice.”

He decided not to pursue that angle. “Honestly,” he said, “a person gets in the habit of behaving a certain way and it’s hard to stop. For instance, I’ve got an aunt—my Aunt Tessie, remember her?—who believes in astrology.”

“No! She *doesn’t!*”

“Surest thing. She doesn’t look nutty, does she? But she is and it’s embarrassing because she will talk about it and mother insists that I have to be polite. If I could just tell her she has holes in her

head, it wouldn't matter. But oh no! I have to listen to her rave and pretend that she's a sane, responsible adult—when she can't count above ten without an abacus."

"An 'abacus'?"

"You know—a slipstick with beads. I said 'abacus' because there isn't a prayer that she could ever learn to read a slipstick. She *likes* being a lame brain—and I have to cater to it."

"Don't do it," Betty said suddenly. "Pay no attention to what your mother says."

"Slugger, you are a subversive influence."

"Sorry, Johnnie," she answered mildly. She added, "Did I ever tell you why I divorced my parents?"

"No, you never did. That's your business."

"So it is. But I think I'll tell you, you might understand me better. Bend down." She grabbed him by an ear, whispered into it.

As John Thomas listened he took on an expression of extreme surprise. "Not really?"

"Fact. They didn't contest it so I never had to tell anyone. But that's why."

"I don't see how you put up with it."

"I didn't I stood up in court and divorced them and got a professional guardian who doesn't have nutty ideas. But look, Johnnie, I didn't bare my soul just to make your chin drop. Heredity isn't everything; I'm myself, an individual. You aren't your parents. You're not your father, you are not your mother. But you are a little late realizing it." She sat up straight. "So be yourself, Knothead, and have the courage to make your own mess of your life. Don't imitate somebody else's mess."

"Slugger, when you talk that stuff, you make it sound rational."

"That's because I'm always rational. How well fixed are you for groceries? I'm hungry."

"You're as bad as Lummox. The grub sack is over there."

"Lunch?" inquired Lummox, hearing his name.

"Umm… Betty, I don't want him tearing down trees, not in daylight. How long will it take them to track me down?"

"I wouldn't count on over three days, big as this place is."

"Well… I'll hold back food for five, just in case." He selected a dozen canned rations and gave them to Lummox. He did not open them as Lummox rather liked having the packages suddenly become hot when he bit into them. He finished them off before Betty had their own lunches opened.

After they ate Johnnie started to bring up the subject again. "Betty, do you really think that—" He broke off suddenly. "Hear anything?"

She listened, then nodded solemnly.

"How fast?"

"Not over two hundred."

He nodded. "Then they are scanning. Lummox! Don't move a

muscle!”

“I won’t, Johnnie. Why not move a muscle?”

“Do it!”

“Don’t get excited,” Betty advised. “They are probably just laying out their search pattern. Chances are they couldn’t identify us either in the scope or visually with these trees to break up the image.” But she looked worried. “I wish Lummie were already in the mine tunnel, though. If anyone is smart enough to run a selective scan straight down that road while we’re on it tonight…well, we’ve had it.”

John Thomas was not really listening. He was leaning forward, cupping his ears with both hands. “Hush!” he whispered, “Betty—they’re coming back!”

“Don’t panic. It’s probably the other leg of the search pattern.”

But even as she said it she knew that she was wrong. The sound came over them, hovered and dropped in pitch. They looked up, but the denseness of the forest and the altitude of the craft kept them from seeing it.

Suddenly there was a light so bright that it made the sharp sunlight seem dusky when it passed. Betty gulped. “What was *that?*”

“Ultraflash photo,” he answered soberly. “They’re checking what they picked up on the scope.”

The sound above them squealed higher, then dropped; the eyeburning flash occurred again. “Stereoed it,” Johnnie announced solemnly. “They’ll really see us now, if they only suspected before.”

“Johnnie, we’ve got to get Lummox out of here!”

“How? Take him up on the road and let them pinpoint him with bomb? No, kid, our only hope now is that they decide he is a big boulder—I’m glad I made him stay tucked in.” He added, “We mustn’t move, either. They may go away.”

Even that outside hope passed. One after another, four more ships were heard. Johnnie ticked them off. “That one has taken station to the south. The third one was north, I think. Now they’ll cover to the west…a pinwheel guard. They’ve got us boxed, Slugger.”

She looked at him, her face dead white. “What do we do, Johnnie?”

“Huh? Why, noth—No, Betty look. You duck down through the trees to the creek. Take your flight harness with you. Then follow the stream a good distance and take to the air. Keep low until you get out from under their umbrella. They’ll let you go—they don’t want you.”

“And what will *you* be doing?”

“Me? I stay here.”

“And so do I.”

Johnnie said fretfully, “Don’t make me any trouble, Slugger. You’d just be in the way.”

“What do you think you can do? You don’t even have a gun.”

“I have this,” John Thomas answered grimly, touching his sheath

knife, "—and Lummox can throw rocks."

She stared at him, then laughed wildly. "What? Rocks indeed! Oh, Johnnie—"

"They're not going to take us without a fight. Now will you get out of here—fast!—and quit being a nuisance?"

"No!"

"Look, Slugger, there isn't time to argue. You get clear and fast. I stay with Lummox; that's my privilege. He's mine."

She burst into tears. "And you're *mine*, you big stupid oaf."

He tried to answer her and could not. His face began to break in the spasmodic movements of a man trying to control tears. Lummox stirred uneasily. "What's the matter, Johnnie?" he piped.

"Huh?" John Thomas replied in a choked voice. "Nothing." He reached up and patted his friend. "Nothing at all, old fellow. Johnnie's here. It's all right."

"All right, Johnnie."

"Yes," agreed Betty faintly. "It's all right, Lummie." She added in a low voice to John Thomas. "It'll be quick, won't it, Johnnie? We won't feel it?"

"Uh, I guess so! Hey! None of that—in just one half second I'm going to punch you right on the button…and then dump you off the bank. That ought to protect you from the blast."

She shook her head slowly, without anger nor fear. "It's too late, Johnnie. You know it is. Don't scold me—just hold my hand."

"But—" He stopped. "Hear that?"

"More of them."

"Yeah. They're probably building an octagon…to make sure we don't get out."

A sudden thunderclap spared her the need to answer. It was followed by the squeal of a hovering ship; this time they could see it, less than a thousand feet over their heads. Then an iron voice rumbled out of the sky. "Stuart! John Stuart! Come out in the open!"

Johnnie took out his sheath knife, threw back his head and shouted, "Come and get me!"

Betty looked up at him, her face shining, and patted his sleeve. "Tell 'em, Johnnie!" she whispered. "That's my Johnnie."

The man behind the giant voice seemed to have a directional mike trained on him; he was answered: "We don't want you and we don't want to hurt anybody. Give up and come out."

He threw back a one-word defiance and added, "We aren't coming out!"

The thundering voice went on, "Final warning, John Stuart. Come out with your hands empty. We'll send a ship down for you."

John Thomas shouted back, "Send it down and we'll wreck it!" He added hoarsely to Lummox, "Got some rocks, Lummie?"

"Huh? Sure! Now, Johnnie?"

"Not yet. I'll tell you."

The voice remained silent; no ship came down to them. Instead a

ship other than the command ship dropped swiftly, squatted a hundred feet above the pines and about the same distance from them laterally. It started a slow circle around them, almost a crawl.

Immediately there was a rending sound, then a crash as a forest giant toppled to the ground. Another followed at once. Like a great invisible hand a drag field from the ship knocked over trees and swept them aside. Slowly it cut a wide firebreak around them. “Why are they doing that?” Betty whispered.

“It’s a forestry service ship. They’re cutting us off.”

“But why? Why don’t they just do it and get it over with?” She began to shake, he put an arm around her.

“I don’t know, Slugger. They’re driving.”

The ship closed the circle, then faced them and seemed to settle back on its haunches. With the delicate care of a dentist pulling a tooth the operator reached in, selected one tree, plucked it out of the ground, and tossed it aside. He picked another—and still another. Gradually a wide path was being cut through the timber to the spot where they waited.

And there was nothing to do but wait. The ranger’s ship removed the last tree that shielded them; the tractor field brushed them as he claimed it, making them stagger and causing Lummox to squeal with terror. John Thomas recovered himself and slapped the beast’s side. “Steady, boy. Johnnie is here.”

He thought about having them retreat back from the clearing now in front of them, but there seemed no use in it.

The logging ship lay off; an attack ship moved in. It dropped suddenly and touched ground at the end of the corridor. Johnnie gulped and said, “*Now*, Lummox. Anything that comes out of that ship—see if you can hit it.”

“You bet, Johnnie!” Lummox reached with both hands for ammunition.

But he never picked up the rocks. John Thomas felt as if he had been dumped into wet concrete up to his chest; Betty gasped and Lummox squealed. Then he piped, “Johnnie! The rocks are stuck!”

John Thomas labored to speak. “It’s all right, boy, Don’t struggle. Just hold still. Betty, you all right?”

“Can’t breathe!” she gasped.

“Don’t fight it. They’ve got us.”

Eight figures poured out of the door of the ship. They looked not human, being covered head to foot with heavy metal mesh. Each wore a helmet resembling a fencer’s mask and carried as a back pack a field anti-generator. They trotted confidently in open double file toward the passage through the trees; as they struck the field they slowed slightly, sparks flew, and a violet nimbus formed around each. But on they came.

The second four were carrying a large metal-net cylinder, high as a man and of equal width. They balanced it easily up in the air. The

man in the lead called out, “Swing wide of the beast. We’ll get the kids out first, then dispose of him.” He sounded quite cheerful.

The squad came up to the odd group of three, cutting around without passing close to Lummox. “Easy! Catch them both,” the leader called out. The barrellike cage was lowered over Betty and John Thomas, setting slowly until the man giving orders reached inside and flipped a switch—whereupon it struck sparks and dropped to the ground.

He gave them a red-faced grin. “Feels good to get the molasses off you, doesn’t it?”

Johnnie glared at him with his chin quivering, and replied insultingly while he tried to rub cramps out of his leg muscles. “Now, now!” the officer answered mildly. “No good to feel that way. You made us do it.” He glanced up at Lummox. “Good grief! He *is* a big beast, isn’t he? I’d hate to meet him in a dark alley, without weapons.”

Johnnie found that tears were streaming down his face and that he could not stop them. “Go ahead!” he cried, his voice misbehaving. “Get it over with!”

“Eh?”

“He never meant any harm! So kill him quickly…don’t play cat-and-mouse with him.” He broke down and sobbed, covering his face with his hands. Betty put her hands on his shoulders and sobbed with him.

The officer looked distressed. “What are you talking about, son? We aren’t here to hurt him. We have orders to bring him in without a scratch on him—even if we lost men in the process. Craziest orders I ever had to carry out.”

CHAPTER XII

Concerning Pidgie-Widgie

MR. KIKU was feeling good. Breakfast was not a burning lump in his middle; he felt no need to shop in his pill drawer, nor even a temptation to get out his real estate folders. The Triangular Conference was going well and the Martian delegates were beginning to talk sense. Ignoring the various amber lights on his desk he began singing: "*Frankie and Johnnie were lovers…and oh boy how they could love…swore to be true to each other…*"

He had a fair baritone voice and no sense of pitch.

Best of all that silly, confused Hroshian affair was almost over… and no bones broken. Good old Doc Ftaeml seemed to think that there was an outside chance of establishing diplomatic relations, so delighted the Hroshii had been at recovering their missing Hroshia.

With a race as powerful as the Hroshii diplomatic relations were essential…they must be allies, though that might take a while. Perhaps not too long, he decided; they certainly did nip-ups at the sight of Lummox…almost idolatrous.

Looking back, the things that had confused them were obvious. Who would have guessed that a creature half as big as a house and over a century old was a baby? Or that this race attained hands only when old enough to use them? For that matter, why was this Hroshia so much bigger than its co-racials? Its size had misled Greenberg and himself as much as anything. Interesting point…he'd have the xenologists look into it.

No matter. By now Lummox was on his…*her* way to the Hroshian ship. No fuss, no ceremony, no publicity, and the danger was over. Could they actually have volatilized Terra? Just as well not to have found out. All's well that ends well. He went back to singing.

He was still singing when the "urgent" light began jittering and he delivered the last few bars into Greenberg's face: "…*just as true as the stars above!*" He added. "Sergei, can you sing tenor?"

"Why should you care, boss? That wasn't a tune."

"You're jealous. What do you want, son? See them off okay?"

"Unh, boss, there's a slight hitch. I've got Dr. Ftaeml with me. Can we see you?"

"What is it?"

"Let's wait until we are alone. One of the conference rooms?"

"Come into the office," Mr. Kiku said grimly. He switched off, opened a drawer, selected a pill and took it.

Greenberg and the medusoid came in at once: Greenberg flopped down in a chair as if exhausted, pulled out a cigarette, felt in his pockets, then put it away. Mr. Kiku greeted Dr. Ftaeml formally, then said to Greenberg, "Well?"

"Lummox didn't leave."

"Eh?"

"Lummox refused to leave. The other Hroshii are boiling like ants. I've kept the barricades up and that part of the space port around their landing craft blocked off. We've got to do something."

"Why? This development is startling, but I fail to see that it's our responsibility. Why the refusal to embark?"

"Well…" Greenberg looked helplessly at Ftaeml.

The Rargyllian said smoothly, "Permit me to explain, sir. The Hroshia refuses to go aboard without her pet."

"Pet?"

"The kid, boss. John Thomas Stuart."

"Exactly," agreed Ftaeml. "The Hroshia states that she has been raising 'John Thomases' for a long time; she refuses to go home unless she can take her John Thomas with her. She was quite imperious about it."

"I see," agreed Kiku. "To put it in more usual language the boy and the Hroshia are attached to each other. That's not surprising; they grew up together. But Lummox will have to put up with the separation, just as John Thomas Stuart had to. As I recall, he made a bit of fuss; we told him to shut up and shipped him home. That's what the Hroshia must do: tell her to shut up, force her, if necessary, into their landing craft and take her along. That's what they came here for,"

The Rargyllian answered, "Permit me to say, sir, that by putting it into 'more usual language' you have missed the meaning. I have been discussing it with her in her own tongue."

"Eh? Has she learned so quickly?"

"She has long known it. The Hroshii, Mr. Under Secretary, know their own language almost from the shell. One may speculate that this use of language almost on the instinctive level is one reason, perhaps *the* reason, why they find other languages difficult and never learn to use them well. The Hroshia speaks your language hardly as well as one of your four-year-old children, though I understand that she began acquiring it one of your generations ago. But in her own language she is scathingly fluent…so I learned, much to my sorrow."

"So? Well, let her talk. Words can't hurt us."

"She *has* talked…she has given orders to the commander of the expedition to recover her pet at once. Otherwise, she states, she will remain here and continue raising 'John Thomases.'"

"And," Greenberg added, "the commander has handed us an ultimatum to produce John Thomas Stuart at once…or else."

"'Or else' meaning what I think it means?" Kiku answered slowly.

“The works,” Greenberg said simply. “Now that I’ve seen their ground craft I’m not sure but what they can.”

“You must understand, sir,” Ftaeml added earnestly, “that the commander is as distressed as you are. But he must attempt to carry out the wishes of the Hroshia. This mating was planned more than two thousand of your years ago; they will not give it up lightly. He cannot allow her to remain…nor can he force her to leave. He is very much upset.”

“Aren’t we all?” Mr. Kiku took out two more pills. “Dr. Ftaeml, I have a message for your principals. Please convey it exactly.”

“I shall, sir.”

“Please tell them that their ultimatum is rejected with contempt. Please…”

“Sir! I beg of you!”

“Attend me. Tell them that and do not soften it. Tell them that we tried in every way to help them, that we succeeded, and that they have answered kindness with threats. Tell them that their behavior is unworthy of civilized people and that the invitation to join the Community of Civilizations is withdrawn. Tell them that we spit in their faces…find an idiom of equal strength. Tell them that free men may die, but they are never bullied.”

Greenberg was grinning widely and clasping both hands in the ancient sign of approval. Dr. Ftaeml seemed to grow pale under his outer chitin.

“Sir,” he said, “I greatly regret being required to deliver this message.”

Kiku smiled icily. “Deliver it as given. But before you do, find opportunity to speak to the Hroshia Lummox. You can do so?”

“Most assuredly, sir.”

“Tell her that the commander of the expedition, in his zeal, seems bent on killing the human, John Thomas Stuart. See that she understands what is threatened.”

The Rargyllian arranged his mouth in a broad smile. “Forgive me, sir; I underestimated you. Both messages will be delivered, in the proper order.”

“That is all.”

“Your good health, sir.” The Rargyllian turned to Greenberg, put a loose-jointed arm around his shoulders. “My brother Sergei, we have already found our way together out of one tight maze. Now, with the help of your spiritual father, we shall find our way out of another. Eh?”

“Right, Doc.”

Ftaeml left. Kiku turned to Greenberg and said, “Get the Stuart boy here. Get him at once, yourself, personally. Umm…bring his mother, too. He’s under age, isn’t he?”

“Yes. Boss, what’s the plan? You aren’t going to turn him over to them?…after that wonderful kick in the teeth you handed them?”

“Of course I am. But on my own terms. I don’t intend to let those

animated pool tables think they can push us around, We'll use this to get what we want. Now get going!"

"I'm gone."

Mr. Kiku stayed at his desk, checking papers with part of his mind while letting his subconscious feel out the problem of Lummox. He had a strong hunch that tide was at flood…for humans. It was necessary to judge how to ride it. He was in this revery when the door opened and the Most Honorable Mr. Roy MacClure walked in. "There you are, Henry! Pull yourself together, man… Beulah Murgatroyd is coming to call."

"Beulah who?"

"Beaulah Murgatroyd. *The* Beulah Murgatroyd."

"Should I know?"

"What? Man, don't you ever watch stereovision?"

"Not if I can possibly avoid it."

MacClure shook his head indulgently. "Henry, you don't get around enough. You bury yourself in here and push your little buttons and don't even know what is going on in the world."

"Possibly."

"Positively. You're out of touch, man…it's a good thing you don't have to deal with people."

Mr. Kiku permitted himself a wintry smile, "I suppose so."

"I'll bet you three to one you don't know who is ahead in the World Series."

"The World Series? That's baseball, isn't it? I'm sorry but I haven't even had time to follow the cricket matches of late years."

"See what I mean? Though how you can mention cricket in the same breath with baseball… Never mind. Since you don't know who the famous Beulah Murgatroyd is, I'll tell you. She's Pidgie-Widgie's mother, so to speak."

"'Pidgie-Widgie'?" Mr. Kiku echoed.

"You're pulling my leg. The creator of the Pidgie-Widgie stories for children. You know—*Pidgie-Widgie on the Moon*, *Pidgie-Widgie Goes to Mars*, *Pidgie-Widgie and the Space Pirates*."

"I'm afraid I don't."

"That's hard to believe. But you don't have any kids, do you?"

"Three."

But Mr. MacClure was still talking. "Now she's taken Pidgie-Widgie on the air and it's really something. For the kids of course but so comical that the grown-ups follow it, too. You see, Pidgie-Widgie is a puppet about a foot high. He goes zooming through space, rescuing people and blasting pirates and having a grand ole time…the kids love him. And at the end of each installment Mrs. Murgatroyd comes on and they have a bowl of Hunkies together and talk. You like Hunkies?"

Mr. Kiku shuddered. "No."

"Well, you can just pretend to eat them, I suppose. But it is the biggest breakfast-food show on the air, reaches everybody."

"And this is important?"

"Important? Man, do you know how many people eat breakfast every morning?"

"No. Not too many, I hope. I wish I had not."

Mr. MacClure glanced at his watch. "We'll have to hurry. The technicians are setting up the gear now. She'll be here any moment."

"Technicians?"

"Didn't I say? Mrs. Murgatroyd will interview us, with Pidgie-Widgie in her lap and taking part. Then they'll patch it into the show. A wonderful boost for the department."

"*No!*"

"Eh? Mr. Kiku, did I understand you correctly?"

"Mr. Secretary," Mr. Kiku said tensely, "I couldn't possibly do that. I… I'm subject to stage fright."

"What? Why, that's absurd! You helped me open the Triangular Conference. You spoke without notes for thirty minutes."

"That's different. That's shop talk, with other professionals."

The Secretary frowned. "I hate to insist, if it really makes you nervous. But Mrs. Murgatroyd asked for you especially. You see…" MacClure looked mildly embarrassed. "…Pidgie-Widgie preaches racial tolerance and so forth. Brothers under the skin…the sort of thing we all want to encourage. So?"

Mr. Kiku said fimly, "I'm sorry."

"Come now! Surely you're not going to force me to insist?"

"Mr. Secretary," Kiku answered quietly, "you will find that my job description does not require me to be a stereovision actor. If you will give me a written order, I will submit it to our legal bureau for opinion, then answer you officially."

Mr. MacClure frowned. "Henry, you can be a stubborn little beast, can't you? I wonder how you got so high in the heap?"

Mr. Kiku did not answer; MacClure went on, "I won't let you pull the rule book on me; I'm too old a fox. Though I must say I didn't think you would do that to me."

"Sorry, sir. I really am."

"So am I. I'll try to. convince you that it is important to the department, whether a civil servant can be ordered to do it or not. You see, Beulah Murgatroyd is the power behind 'The Friends of Lummox.' So…"

"'The Friends of Lummox'?"

"I knew you would see it differently. After all, you've been handling that whoop-te-do. Therefore…"

"What in heaven's name are 'The Friends of Lummox'?"

"Why, you set up the original interview with them yourself. But if I hadn't happened to lunch with Wes Robbins, we might have missed the boat on it."

"I seem to recall a memorandum. A routine matter."

"Mrs. Murgatroyd is *not* routine, I've been trying to tell you. You precedent-and-protocol boys lose touch with the people. If you don't

mind my saying so, that's why you never quite get to the top."

"I don't mind in the least," Mr. Kiku said gently.

"Eh?" The Secretary looked slightly embarrassed. "I mean, there's a place for a grass-roots politician, like me, with his finger on the pulse…though I admit I don't have your special training. You see?"

"There is work for both our talents, sir. But go on. Perhaps I did 'miss the boat' in this instance. The 'Friends of Lummox' memorandum must have come through before the name meant anything to me."

"Probably. I wasn't criticizing your attention to duty, Henry. Fact is, you work too hard…the universe won't run down if you don't wind it. But about this F. of L. deal—we intervened in some silly case out west; you know about it, you sent one of our people—the case turned out to be about his Hoorussian Lummox, The court's verdict…*our* verdict, you might say, was to destroy the beast. By the way, Henry, have you disciplined the man responsible?"

"No, sir."

"Why the delay?"

"He won't be disciplined, sir. He was perfectly right, on the evidence."

"I don't see it that way. Better send his file jacket to my office. I want to consider it myself."

"Sir," Mr. Kiku said softly, "were you thinking of reversing me on a matter of administrative discipline?"

"Eh? I intend to review the matter."

"Because if you are, sir, you can have my resignation now. My usefulness will be at an end."

"What? Henry, don't be nasty." The Secretary drummed on Mr. Kiku's desk. "Confound it, man, let's be frank with each other. I know that you career men can make it hard for an appointee if you try… I didn't get into politics yesterday. But as long as I am holding the sack, I intend to have discipline around here. My privilege?"

"Yes…your privilege."

"And my responsibility. Probably you are right about this man, whoever he is…you're usually right, or we couldn't keep things going. But it is my responsibility to review things whenever I think it necessary. However, there is no call for you to talk about resigning until I actually do reverse you. Since you have forced the issue, if I do find it necessary to reverse you on this, I'll ask for your resignation. But until I do, keep your shirt on. Fair enough?"

"Fair enough. I was hasty, Mr. Secretary. The file jacket will be on your desk."

"On second thought, don't bother. If you are carrying one of your favorites…"

"I have no favorites, Mr. MacClure. I dislike them all, impersonally."

"Sometimes I think you hate yourself. Now where were we? Oh

yes! Well, when we made that terrible bust about the Hoorussian, Mrs. Murgatroyd saw a chance to do a good deed. Oh, I suppose she was out to pep up her program, but that's beside the point. Right away, Pidgie-Widgie started telling all his little friends about this. terrible thing and asked them all to write in and join the Friends of Lummox. She got over three million replies in the first twenty-four hours. By now half the kids on this continent and nobody knows how many elsewhere are 'Friends of Lummox,' pledged to protect him from persecution."

"Her," corrected Mr. Kiku.

"Eh?"

"I beg your pardon. I suppose neither term is correct. The Hroshii come in six assorted sexes. You can call Lummox either 'him' or 'her'…we really need new, words. But it doesn't matter."

"Well, it certainly doesn't to me," agreed MacClure. "But if we had actually put the quietus on this Lummox, I believe the kids would have started a revolution. I really do. Not to mention the adults who are Pidgie-Widgie fans. Even so, the department got a black eye out of it. But Beulah Murgatroyd is willing to go along with a deal to help us out. She interviews us and I answer the general questions and you back me on the details—all about how the department is careful to protect the rights of our non-human friends and how everybody ought to be tolerant—the usual line. Then Pidgie-Widgie asks what happened to Lummox and you tell the kiddies how Lummox was really sort of a fairy prince in disguise… or princess…and how Lummox has gone away to his home in the sky. It will be terrific."

MacClure added, "That's all you have to do. They patch in a shot of Lummox getting into the Hoorussian ship and waving goodbye. Then we all eat a bowl of Hunkies—don't worry, I'll see that your bowl is empty!—and Pidgie-Widgie sings his 'Skylarker' song. End. It won't take twenty minutes and it will be a big thing for the department. Okay?"

"No."

"Now, Henry… All right, you won't even have to *pretend* to eat Hunkies."

"No."

"Henry, you're impossible. Don't you agree that it is our business to help train up the kids to understand their responsibilities and have right attitudes in this modern age—the age of the Community of Civilizations?"

"No, sir, I do not. That is the business of parents and educators, not of government. This department has more than it can do just to try to hold things together in the face of ever-increasing xenic problems." Mr. Kiku added to himself: even if I did agree, I wouldn't do it by eating Hunkies!

"Hmm… A narrow attitude, Henry. A bureaucratic one, if I may say so. You know perfectly well that we are in hot water about this

Hoorussian thing from other directions, too, with The Society for the Preservation of the Status Quo screaming for isolation and the Keep Earth Human League jumping on us. It gets the Council uneasy. Along comes a chance to build up public opinion against such crackpots and you won't even help. You don't have the Status Quo people and the Human-Earth jokers bothering you—because I keep them off your neck."

"I'm sorry, sir. But you shouldn't waste time on them either. No doubt you know that there is a money motive back of every one of those apparently crackpot organizations. Let the people with opposing economic interests fight them—the shipping lines and the importers and the scientists. Our business is foreign relations. When we are bothered by pressure groups, we should let our public relations people handle them; that is what they are for."

"What am I but a glorified public relations man?" MacClure answered angrily. "I haven't any illusions about this confounded job."

"Not true, sir. You have the prime policy responsibility. I carry out policy—within the limits of my job."

"Hummph! You set policy. You drive me like a horse. I'm beginning to realize it."

"Sorry, sir. I suppose everyone makes policy…even the doorman…to some extent. It's unavoidable. But I try to do my job."

Mr. Kiku's private secretary called in by voice. "Mr. Kiku, is the Secretary with you? Mrs. Beulah Murgatroyd is waiting."

"Be right in," called out MacClure.

Kiku added quietly, "Mildred, see that she is entertained. There will be a slight delay."

"Yes, sir. The Secretary's aide is taking care of her."

"Good."

"There will be no delay," MacClure said to Mr. Kiku. "If you won't, you won't…though I'm disappointed in you. But I can't keep her waiting."

"Sit down, Mr. Secretary."

"Eh?"

"Sit down, sir. Even the mighty Mrs. Murgatroyd must wait on some things. A major emergency has come up; you will certainly have to face the Council about it…possibly a special session this evening."

"What? Why didn't you say so?"

"I was organizing my thoughts preparatory to briefing you, sir, when you came in. For the past several minutes I have been trying to tell you that this department has really important things to do—besides selling Hunkies."

The Secretary stared at him, then reached across Kiku's desk. "Uh, Mildred? This is the Secretary. Tell Commodore Murthi that I am unavoidably detained and that he is to do his best to keep Mrs. Murgatroyd happy."

"Yes. Mr. Secretary."

MacClure turned back. "Now, Henry, quit lecturing me and spill it."

Mr. Kiku began a full report of the new Hroshii crisis. Mr. MacClure listened without comment. Just as Mr. Kiku concluded his account of the rejection of the ultimatum the sound communicator again came to life. "Chief? Murthi here. Mrs. Murgatroyd has another appointment."

Mr. MacClure turned toward the voice. "Hush circuit?"

"Of course, sir."

"Listen, Jack, I'll be a few minutes yet. Keep her happy."

"But—"

"Make love to her, if necessary. Now switch off. I'm busy!" He turned back to Mr. Kiku and scowled. "Henry, you've shoved me out on a limb again. You've left me nothing to do but back your play."

"May I ask what the Secretary would have done?"

"Huh?" MacClure frowned. "Why, I would have said exactly what you said, I suppose…but in nastier language. I admit that I probably wouldn't have thought of cutting inside them through this Lummox creature. That was cute."

"I see, sir. It being a rejection of a formal ultimatum, what precautionary action would the Secretary have taken? I should add that I wanted to avoid having the department advise the Council to order battle stations for the entire planet."

"What are you saying? Nothing like that would have been necessary. I would have ordered the Inner Guard to close and blast them out of the sky, on my own responsibility. After all, they are at our inner defense zone and breathing threats…a simple emergency police action."

Mr. Kiku thought, that is what I guessed you would do…but what he said was, "Suppose it turned out that their ship failed to blast out of the sky…and blasted back?"

"What? Preposterous!"

"Mr. Secretary, the only thing I have learned in forty years at this trade is that when you are dealing with 'Out There' nothing is preposterous."

"Well, I'll be… Henry, you actually believed they could hurt us. You were frightened." He searched Mr. Kiku's face. "Are you holding something back? Do you have evidence that they might be able to carry out this preposterous threat?"

"No, sir."

"Well?"

"Mr. MacClure, in my country hardly more than three hundred years ago there lived a very valiant tribe. A small force of Europeans made certain demands on them…taxes, they called it. The chief was a brave man and his warriors were numerous and well trained. They knew the strangers had guns, but they even had some guns of their own. But mostly they relied on numbers and courage. They planned

cleverly and caught the enemy in a box canyon. So they thought."

"Yes?"

"They had never heard of machine guns. They learned about them in a very final way—for they were very brave and kept coming on. That tribe is no more, no survivors."

"If you are trying to scare me, well…never mind. But you still haven't given me evidence. After all, we are not an ignorant tribe of savages. No parallel."

"Perhaps. Yet, after all, the machine gun of that era was only a minor improvement over the ordinary gun of the time. We have weapons which make a machine gun seem like a boy's knife. And yet…"

"You are suggesting that these Hoorussians have weapons that would make our latest developments as useless as clubs. Frankly, I don't want to believe it and I don't. The power in the nucleus of the atom is the ultimate possible power in the universe. You know that, I know that. We've got it. No doubt they've got it, too, but we outnumber them millions to one and we are on our home grounds."

"So the tribal chief reasoned."

"Eh? Not the same thing."

"Nothing ever is," Mr. Kiku answered wearily. "I was not speculating about magic weapons beyond the concepts of our physicists; I was merely wondering what some refinement might do to a known weapon…some piece of tinkering already implicit in the theories. I don't know, of course. I know nothing of such things."

"Well, neither do I but I've been assured that… See here, Henry; I'm going to order that police action, right away."

"Yes, sir."

"Well? Don't sit there frozen-faced saying 'Yes, sir.' You don't *know*, do you? So why shouldn't I do it?"

"I did not object, sir. Do you want a sealed circuit? Or do you want the base commander to report here?"

"Henry, you are without question the most irritating man in seventeen planets. I asked you why I should *not* do it?"

"I know of no reason, sir. I can only tell you why I did not recommend it to you."

"Well?"

"Because I did *not* know. Because I had only the fears of a non-human who might be even more timid than myself, or badly misled by what appears to be almost superstitious awe. Since I did not know, I did not choose to play Russian roulette with our planet at stake. I chose to fight with words as long as possible. Do you want to give the order, sir? Or shall I take care of the details?"

"Quit badgering me." He glared at his Under Secretary, his face red. "I suppose your next move is to threaten to resign."

Mr. Kiku grudged a small smile. "Mr. MacClure, I never offer to resign twice in the same day." He added, "No, I will wait until after the police action. Then, if we are both alive, I will have been proved

wrong on a major matter; my resignation will be necessary. May I add, sir, that I hope you are right? I would much rather enjoy a quiet old age than to have my judgment vindicated posthumously."

MacClure worked his mouth but did not speak. Mr. Kiku went on quietly, "May I offer a suggestion to the Secretary in my official capacity?"

"What? Of course. You are required to by law. Speak up."

"May I urge that the attack commence in the next few minutes? We may achieve by haste what might fail by delay. BuAstro can supply us with the orbit elements of the enemy ship." Kiku leaned toward his communicator.

It came to life before he could touch it. "Chief? Murthi here. I've done my best, but she…"

"Tell her I can't see her!"

"Sir?"

"Uh…butter it on. You know how. Now shut up and don't call me again."

"Aye aye, sir."

Mr. Kiku called BuAstro. "The chief ballistician, please…at once. Ah, Cartier…seal your end; this end is sealed. And put a hush on it. All right, I want the tactical elements of the…"

MacClure reached out and broke the connection. "All right," he said savagely, "you've outbluffed me."

"I was not bluffing, sir."

"All right, all right, you've convinced me that you have a wise head on you. I. can't take a blind chance with the lives of five billion people any more than you can. Want me to crawl?"

"No, sir. But I am much relieved. Thank you."

"*You're* relieved? How about *me?* Now tell me how you intend to play this. I'm still in the dark."

"Very well, Mr. Secretary. In the first place I have sent for the Stuart boy…"

"The Stuart boy? Why?"

"To persuade him to go. I want his consent."

The Secretary looked as if he could not believe his ears. "Do I understand, Mr. Kiku, that after rejecting their ultimatum your only plan is to capitulate?"

"That is not how I would describe it."

"I don't care what diplomatese you phrase it in. We will not surrender the boy. I was not willing to take a risk blindly, but this is another matter. I will not surrender one human being no matter what the pressure is…and I can assure you that the Council will agree. There is such a thing as human dignity. I must add that I am astonished…and disgusted."

"May I continue, sir?"

"Well…go ahead. Speak your piece."

"No thought of surrendering the boy was ever in my mind. In the science of diplomacy appeasement has long been an exploded theory.

Had I even considered sacrificing the boy, I would applaud your disgust. As it is, it missed me."

"But you said…"

"Please, sir. I know what I said. I sent for the boy to explore his own wishes. From what I know of him it is possible that he will be willing, even eager."

MacClure shook his head. "It's not something we could permit, even if the lad were crazy enough to do it. Nine hundred light-years from other human beings? I would as soon offer poison to a baby."

"That's not the picture at all, sir. If I have his consent, I can keep the fact to myself during negotiations…play from a concealed ace. There is much to negotiate."

"Such as?"

"Their science. Their trade. A whole new volume of space. The possibilities can be only dimly seen."

MacClure stirred restlessly. "I'm not sure but what that attack is still the thing to do. If men are men, some risks must be taken. Snuggling up to vermin who threaten us… I don't like it."

"Mr. Secretary, if my plans do not work…or fail to meet your approval, then I will join you in shouting defiance at the sky. We should bargain…but bargain as men."

"Well…go on. Tell me the rest."

CHAPTER XIII

"No, Mr. Secretary"

MR. KIKU's wife let him sleep late the next morning. She did this occasionally, reasoning that no crisis was important enough to wake him when he needed rest. When he got to his office he found Wesley Robbins, Special Assistant Secretary for public relations, asleep in his chair. Robbins was not a diplomat, did not want to be one, and made a point of showing it.

"Good morning, Wes," Mr. Kiku said mildly.

"What's good about it?" Robbins chucked a copy of the *CAPITAL TIMES* at the Under Secretary. "Seen this?"

"No." Mr. Kiku unfolded it.

"Twenty-three years in the newspaper business…to be scooped on my own beat."

Mr. Kiku read:

ALIEN INVADERS
THREATEN WAR!!!
Demand Hostages

Capital Enclave, Sep. 12 (GP)… Space Secretary MacClure revealed today that the xenic visitors dubbed "Hroshii" now landed at Capital port have demanded, under threats of war, that the Federation…

Kiku scanned down, saw that a distortion of his answer to the Hroshii had been credited to Secretary MacClure, with no mention of the possibility of peaceful settlement. A trailer story reported the Chief of the General Staff as assuring Earth and all the federated planets that there was nothing to fear from the insolent aliens. A South Asian senator demanded to know what steps were being taken… Kiku glanced at it all but discarded the meaningless 90%, including a blast from the Keep Earth Human League and a "We Stand at the Crossroads" editorial. There was an interview with Mrs. Murgatroyd but he did not take time to find out which side Pidgie-Widgie was on.

"Ain't that a mess?" Robbins demanded. "Where do you hide your cigarettes?"

"It does seem a rather lavish waste of paper," Kiku agreed. "In the arm of the visitor's chair."

"Well, how do we handle it? I was caught flat-footed. Why

doesn't somebody tell me these things?"

"Just a moment." Mr. Kiku leaned to his desk. "Security? Ah, O'Neill…place more special police around the Hroshii landing craft…"

"You've got 'em, boss. But why doesn't somebody tell us these things?"

"A fair question. Whatever guard you are using, use more. There must not only be no riot; there must be no incidents. Station as many trained tension-dispersal technicians in the crowd as you can scrape up, then borrow more from other agencies. Then give special attention to lunatic-fringe organizations…xenophobic ones, I mean. Any trouble yet?"

"Nothing we couldn't snuff out. But I'm making no promises. I still think somebody ought to tell…"

"No doubt. Keep in touch with me." Kiku turned to Robbins. "Do you know how the interview happened to be granted?"

"Do I act like it? He was going to the 'Tri Con' citation dinner, safe as houses. I got his approval on his speech, gave him his copy and passed the others around to the boys, with suggestions on how to play it. Everybody happy. I get up this morning feeling ninety and before I've had my coffee I feel a hundred and fifty. Know anybody wants my job? I'm going to study how to be a beachcomber."

"A reasonable thought. Wes, let me bring you up to date. Nothing was to be released about this matter until it was concluded, but now…" He quickly outlined the latest Hroshii crisis.

Robbins nodded, "I see. And Number One jerked the rug out from under you. A fine playmate."

"Well, we had better see him. Is he here?"

"Yes. I was waiting for you, pal. Will you hold him while I hit him? Or the other way around?"

"Whichever you wish. Shall we get it over with?"

The Secretary was in; they were admitted and MacClure got up to seat them. After which they just sat. Robbins waited for Mr. Kiku to speak, but Kiku held still, face expressionless, a statue carved of ebony.

MacClure began to fidget. "Well, Henry? This is a busy morning… I've already been tied up with the S.G."

"I had thought that you would want to instruct us, Mr. Secretary."

"What for?"

"Have you seen the morning papers, sir?"

"Well…yes."

"There has been a change in policy. Assistant Secretary Robbins and I would like to be briefed on the new policy."

"What new policy?"

"Your new policy concerning the Hroshii, Mr. Secretary. Or are the newspapers in error?"

"Eh? Well, no, not precisely. Exaggerated of course. But no change in policy. I simply told the people what they were entitled to

know."

"The people are entitled to know." Mr. Kiku fitted his fingers together. "Ah, yes. In a government based on free consent of free men the people are always entitled to know. An old bureaucrat, such as myself, sometimes loses track of that fundamental. Thank you for reminding me." He seemed lost in cosmic thought for a moment, then added, "I suppose the thing now is to repair my failure and tell the people everything."

"Eh? What do you mean?"

"Why, the whole story, Mr. Secretary. How through our own ignorance and disregard for the rights of others, both now and in the past, we kidnapped a member of a civilized race. How blind luck alone kept that xenian alive. How as a result of this we now find our own planet threatened with destruction—and how a highly intelligent citizen of a friendly power (I refer to Dr. Ftaeml) assures us that these Hroshii can indeed destroy us. It would be necessary to tell them also that yesterday we were within minutes of ordering an attack on these xenians—but that we lost our nerve and decided to negotiate, since we had no knowledge of our strength relative to theirs, but only the very sobering opinion of Dr. Ftaeml to guide us. Yes, we must tell them that"

Secretary MacClure's mouth was as wide as his eyes. "Heavenly days, Henry! Are you trying to set off riots?"

"Sir? I have taken countermeasures to prevent riots…xenophobia is always ready to flare up and *that*…" He gestured at the newspaper. "…will have an inflammatory effect on some. But you must not be deterred. We bureaucrats become paternalistic; it is so much simpler to do what seems best and let the people know it afterwards… negotiate, or blast a ship out of the sky, or whatever. Mr. Secretary, you have kept in mind, of course, that this Secretariat of which you are a member is responsible not to the North American Union, nor even to the peoples of Earth, but to all sovereignties of the Federation, both on Terra and elsewhere?"

"What's that got to do with it? We're the leading power."

"Whom do you mean by 'we'? Not my little country certainly. No, I was thinking that this will now be settled by vote of the Council and I was wondering whether the Council might possibly vote to surrender one unimportant citizen of North America rather than risk an interstellar war? I wonder how Mars will vote?"

The Secretary got up and strode up and down his office. It was a large room, much larger than Mr. Kiku's. He stopped at the far end and stared out at the Tower of Three Planets and the Hall of Civilizations, while Kiku sat quietly. Wes Robbins slumped in a chair, his bony legs stretched in front of him. He was trimming his nails with a pocket knife; they were long and black and needed the attention.

MacClure turned suddenly to Kiku. "See here, Henry, you confounded word splitter, I won't be bullied."

"Bullied, Mr. Secretary?"

"Yes, bullied. Oh, you dressed it up in your usual double-talk, but I wasn't born yesterday. You know perfectly well that if we give the press these unnecessary details…that nonsense this Dr. Fatima or whatever his name is, this Rargyllian monster, filled you with…yes, and you threatening to tell the press that I got cold feet about an attack…that's a threat if I ever heard one!…you give 'em all that junk and we'd have a row in the Council that would be heard from here to Pluto! With the home governments sending special instructions to their delegates and maybe the Terran bloc getting outvoted. Right on top of this ticklish Triangular Conference it could be disastrous. Yes, that's the word…*disastrous*." MacClure stopped and struggled for breath. "Well, you won't get away with it. You're fired!…understand me? *Fired!* I'll take care of having you removed for cause, or transferring you to the retired list, or whatever the red tape calls for, but you are done, right now. I'm relieving you. You can go home."

"Very well, Mr. Secretary," Mr. Kiku said evenly and started for the door to his office.

In the silence Wes Robbins knife clicked shut loudly. He stood up. "Hold it, Henry! Mac…"

Mr. MacClure looked around. "Huh? What's the matter with *you?* And don't call me 'Mac'; this is official business. I'm still Secretary around here, as I just told Kiku."

"Yes, you are still Secretary—for about two hours, maybe."

"What? Don't be ridiculous! Wes, you will force me to fire you too if you talk that way. Mr. Kiku, you are excused."

"Don't go away, Henry. And quit shoving that stuff, Mac. You can't fire me, I quit ten minutes ago. Mac, are you a complete stuffed shirt? Remember, I knew you when you were a shorthorned Senator, anxious to get a two-inch squib in a gossip column. I liked you then. You seemed to have horse sense, which is scarce in this business. Now you are ready to dump me and I don't like you either. But tell me, for old times' sake: why are you anxious to cut your own throat?"

"What? Not *my* throat. I'm not the Charlie to let a subordinate cut my throat. I've seen it done…but Kiku picked the wrong man."

Robbins shook his head slowly. "Mac, you are dead set on scuttling yourself. Hadn't you better cut Henry's tongue out before the newsboys reach him? Here, you can borrow my knife."

"What?" MacClure looked stunned. He swung around and snapped, "Mr. Kiku! You are not to speak to the press. That's an order."

Robbins bit off some cuticle, spat it out, and said, "Mac, for Pete's sake! You can't both fire him and keep him from talking."

"Departmental secrets…"

"'Departmental secrets' my bald spot! Maybe you could fine him severance pay under the official-secrets rule but do you think that

will stop him? Henry is a man with no fears, no hopes, and no illusions; you can't scare him. What he can tell the reporters will do you more harm if you classify it 'secret' than it would if you didn't try to gag him."

"May I say something?" asked the center of the storm.

"Eh? Go ahead, Mr. Kiku."

"Thank you, Mr. Secretary. I had no intention of telling the press about the messier aspects of this affair. I was simply trying to show, by reductio ad absurdum, that the rule of keeping the public informed can…like any rule…lead to disaster if applied blindly. I felt that you had been indiscreet, sir. I hoped to keep you from further indiscretions while we sought means to repair the damage."

MacClure studied him. "You mean that, Henry?"

"I always mean what I say, sir. It saves time."

MacClure turned to Robbins. "You see, Wes? You were barking up the wrong tree. Henry is an honorable man, even if we do have our differences. See here, Henry, I was too hasty. I honestly thought you were threatening me. Let's forget what I said about asking for your resignation and get on with our jobs. Eh?"

"No, sir."

"What? Come, man, don't be small. I was angry, I was hurt, I made a mistake. I apologize. After all, we have public welfare to consider."

Robbins made a rude noise; Mr. Kiku answered gently, "No, Mr. Secretary, it wouldn't work. Once having been fired by you, I would not again be able to act with confidence under your delegated authority. A diplomat must always act with confidence; it is often his only weapon."

"Um… Well, all I can say is I'm sorry. I really am."

"I believe you, sir. May I make a last and quite unofficial suggestion?"

"Why, certainly, Henry."

"Kampf would be a good man to keep routine moving until you work out your new team."

"Why, surely. If you say he is the man for it, I'm sure he must be. But Henry…we'll keep him there on a temporary basis and you think it over. We'll call it sick leave or something."

"No," Mr. Kiku answered coldly and turned again toward his own office.

Before he could reach it Robbins spoke up loudly. "Take it easy, you two. We aren't through." He spoke to MacClure: "You said that Henry was an honorable man. But you forgot something."

"Eh? What?"

"I ain't."

Robbins went on, "Henry wouldn't do anything that wasn't cricket. Me, I was raised in a river ward and I'm not bothered by niceties. I'm going to gather the boys together and give 'em the word. I'm going to tell them where the body is buried, how the apple

cart was upset, and who put the overalls in the chowder."

MacClure said angrily, "You hand out an unauthorized interview and you'll never hold another job with the administration!"

"Don't threaten me, you over-ripe melon. I'm not a career man; I'm an appointee. After I sing my song I'll get a job on the *Capital Upside Down* column and let the public in on the facts about life among the supermen."

MacClure stared at him. "You don't have any sense of loyalty at all."

"From you, Mac, that sounds real sweet. What are you loyal to? Aside from your political skin?"

Mr. Kiku interposed mildly, "That's not exactly fair, Wes. The Secretary has been quite firm that the Stuart boy must not be sacrificed to expediency."

Robbins nodded. "Okay, Mac, we'll give you that. But you were willing to sacrifice Henry's forty years of service to save your own ugly face. Not to mention shooting off that face without checking with *me*, just to grab a front-page story. Mac, there is nothing a newspaper man despises more than headline hunger. There is something lascivious and disgusting about a man overanxious to see his name in headlines. I can't reform you and don't want to, but be sure that you are going to see your name in headlines, big ones…but for the last time. Unless…"

"What do you mean?…'unless'?"

"Unless we put Humpty-Dumpty together again."

"Uh, how? Now look, Wes, I'll do anything within reason."

"You sure will." Robbins frowned. "There's the obvious way. We can serve Henry's head up on a platter. Blame that interview yesterday on him. He gave you bad advice. He's been fired and all is sweetness and light."

Mr. Kiku nodded. "That's how I had envisioned it. I'd be happy to cooperate…provided my advice is taken on how to conclude the Hroshii affair."

"Don't look relieved, Mac!" Robbins growled. "That's the obvious solution and it would work…because Henry is loyal to something bigger than he is. But that is not what we are going to do."

"But, if Henry is willing, then in the best interests—"

"Stow it. It won't be Henry's head on the platter; it will be yours."

Their eyes locked. At last MacClure said, "If that is your scheme, Robbins, forget it and get out. If you are looking for a fight, you'll get one. The first story to break will be about how I had to fire you two for disloyalty and incompetence."

Robbins grinned savagely. "I hope you play it that way. I'll have fun. But do you want to hear how it could be worked?"

"Well…go ahead."

"You can make it easy or hard. Either way, you are through. Now

keep quiet and let me tell it! You're done, Mac. I don't claim to be a scholar of xenic affairs, but even I can see that civilization can't afford your county-courthouse approach to delicate relations with non-human races… So you're through. The question is: do you do it the hard way? Or do you go easy on yourself and get a nice puff in the history books?"

MacClure glowered but did not interrupt. "Force me to spill what I know, and one of two things happens. Either the Secretary General throws you to the wolves, or he decides to back you up and risk a vote of 'no confidence' from the Council. Which is what he would get. The Martian Commonwealth would gleefully lead the stampede, Venus would follow, the outer colonies and the associated xenic cultures would join in. At the end you would have most of the Terran nations demanding that the North American Union surrender this one individual to avert a bust-up of the Federation.

"All you have to do is to shove the first domino; all the others would fall…and you would be buried under the pile. You couldn't be elected dogcatcher. But the easy way runs like this. You resign…but we don't publish the fact, not for a couple of weeks… Henry, do you think two weeks will be long enough?"

"It should be ample," Mr. Kiku agreed gravely.

"During that time you don't wipe your nose without Henry's permission. You don't say a word unless I okay it. Then you resign in a blaze of glory, with the conclusion of the Hroshian Affair to crown your career. Possibly some way can be found to kick you upstairs to a gaudier job…if you are a good boy. Eh, Henry?"

Mr. Kiku nodded.

MacClure looked around from Kiku's expressionless face to Robbins' contemptuous one. "You two have it neatly plotted," he said bitterly. "Suppose I told you both to go to the devil?"

Robbins yawned. "It won't matter in the long run, believe me. After the administration falls, the new Secretary General will call Henry out of retirement, a safe man will be stuck in your place, and Henry will get on with outmaneuvering the Hroshii. Probably lose three days maybe less. Whitewashing you is harder, but we meant to give you a break. Right, Henry?"

"It would be better so. Dirty linen is best kept in a cupboard."

MacClure chewed his lip. "I'll think it over."

"Good! And I'll wait while you do. Henry, why don't you get back to work? I'll bet that trick desk is lighted up like a Christmas tree."

"Very well." Mr. Kiku left the room.

His desk did look like a fireworks celebration, with three blinking red lights and a dozen amber ones. He disposed of urgent matters, brushed off lesser ones, and began to reduce the stack in his basket, signing without bothering to consider whether his signature continued to carry authority.

He was just sustaining a veto on a passport for a very prominent lecturer—the last time the idiot had been off Earth, he had broken into a temple and taken pictures—when Robbins walked in and chucked a paper on his desk. “Here’s his resignation. Better see the Secretary General at once.”

Mr. Kiku took it. “I shall.”

“I didn’t want you there when I twisted his arm. It’s harder for a man to say ‘Uncle’ with a witness. You understood?”

“Yes.”

“I had to bring up the time we covered up for him about the convention with Kondor.”

“Regrettable.”

“Don’t waste tears. Enough is enough. Now I am going to write the speech he will make before the Council. After that I’ll look up the boys he talked to last night and beg them, for the sake of their dear old home planet, to take the proper line on the follow-up story. They won’t like it.”

“I suppose not.”

“But they’ll go along. Us humans have got to stick together; we are badly outnumbered.”

“So I have always felt. Thanks, Wes.”

“A pleasure. Just one thing I didn’t mention to him…”

“So?”

“I didn’t remind him that the boy’s name was John Thomas Stuart. I’m not sure the Martian Commonwealth would have bolted, in view of that one fact. The Council might have sustained Mac, after all…and we might have found out whether the Hroshian laddies can do what they say they can.”

Kiku nodded. “I thought of that, too. It didn’t seem time to mention it.”

“No. There are so many swell places for a man to keep his mouth shut. What are you smiling at?”

“I was thinking,” Mr. Kiku explained, “that it is a good thing that the Hroshii do not read our newspapers.”

CHAPTER XIV

"Destiny? Fiddlesticks!"

MRS. STUART did read newspapers. Greenberg had had great trouble persuading her to come to Capital and to bring her son, because he was not free to tell her why. But he did persuade her and she had agreed to go the following morning.

When Greenberg arrived the next morning to pick them up he found himself *persona non grata*. She was in a white fury and simply shoved the newspaper into his hand. He glanced at it. "Yes? I saw a copy at the hotel. Nonsense, of course."

"That's what I've been trying to tell mother," John Thomas said sullenly, "but she won't listen,"

"John Thomas, you keep quiet. Well, Mr. Greenberg? What have you to say for yourself?"

Greenberg did not have a good answer. He had tried to call Mr. Kiku as soon as he saw the news story and had been told by Mildred that the boss and Mr. Robbins were with, the Secretary and could not be disturbed. He told her that he would call later, realizing uneasily that trouble was not all at his end.

"Mrs. Stuart, surely you know that news reports are often distorted. There has been no talk of hostages and…"

"How can you say that when it says so right there! That's an interview with the Secretary of Space. Who knows more about it? You? Or the Secretary?"

Greenberg had his own opinion but did not dare express it. "Please, Mrs. Stuart. Newspaper stories should not be accepted at face value. This wild report has nothing to do with the case. I am simply asking you to come to Capital for a quiet talk with the Under Secretary."

"Not likely! If the Under Secretary wants to see me, let him come here."

"Madam, he will, if necessary. Mr. Kiku is an old fashioned gentleman who would not ask a lady to come to him were it not for the press of public affairs. You know that there is an interplanetary conference in progress?"

She answered smugly, "I make it a rule never to pay attention to politics."

He sighed. "Some of us must. Mr. Kiku is unable to come here today because of that conference. We had hoped that you, as a private citizen, would come to him."

“Mr. Greenberg, I reluctantly consented. Now I find that you have deceived me. How do I know but what this is a trick? A plot to turn my son over to those *monsters?*”

“Ma’am, on my honor as an officer of the Federation I assure you…”

“Spare yourself, Mr. Greenberg. Now, if you will excuse me…”

“Mrs. Stuart, I beg you. If you will only…”

“Mr. Greenberg, do not force me to be rude to a guest. But I have nothing more to say.”

Greenberg left. He looked around, intending to bring the boy into the argument, but John Thomas had quietly left. Greenberg went back to his hotel, with no intention of returning to Capital with mission incomplete but judging it useless to argue until she had time to simmer down.

He had his taxi driver drop him on the hotel roof in order to avoid reporters, but a man was waiting there, armed with an interview phone. “Half a mo’, Mr. Commissioner. My name’s Hovey. How about a few words on Secretary MacClure’s announcement?”

“No comment.”

“In other words you agree with it?”

“No comment.”

“Then you disagree?”

“No comment. I’m in a hurry.” This was true; he was anxious to call in and find out what in the name of blue blazing galaxies *had* happened.

“Just a second, please. Westville has a big local angle. I’d like to get a story before the main office sends heavyweights here to push me aside.”

Greenberg relaxed a little…no sense in antagonizing the press and the fellow had a point; he knew how it felt to have someone senior sent to cope with a problem that had started as his. “Okay. But keep it brief; I really am in a hurry.” He took out cigarettes. “Got a light on you?”

“Sure.” They lighted up, Hovey continued, “People are saying that this blast of the Secretary’s is just a smoke screen and that you have come here to get the Stuart boy and turn him over to the Hroshii people. How about it?”

“No com… No, don’t say that; say this and quote me. No citizen of the Federation ever has been or ever will be surrendered as a hostage to any power whatsoever.”

“That’s official?”

“That’s official,” Greenberg said firmly.

“Then what are you doing here? I understand you are trying to take the Stuart kid and his mother back to Capital. Capital Enclave isn’t legally part of the North American Union, is it? If you got him there, our local and national officials couldn’t protect him.”

Greenberg shook his head angrily. “Any citizen of the Federation is on his home grounds in the Enclave. He has all rights there that he

has at home."

"Why do you want him there?"

Greenberg lied fast and fluently. "John Thomas Stuart has knowledge of the psychology of the Hroshii held by no other human being. We want his help in dealing with them."

"That's more like it. 'Westville Boy Recruited as Diplomatic Aide.' How's that for a lead?"

"Sounds good," Greenberg agreed. "Got enough? I'm in a rush."

"Sure," agreed Hovey. "I can pad this to a couple of thousand words. Thanks, Commissioner. See you later."

Greenberg went down and locked himself in, then turned to the phone, intending to call the department, but it came to life first. Chief Dreiser looked out at him. "Mr. Commissioner Greenberg…"

"How do you do, Chief?"

"Well enough, thank you. But Mr. Greenberg—I've just had a call from Mrs. Stuart."

"Yes?" Greenberg had a sudden wish for one of those pills the boss ate.

"Mr. Greenberg, we always try to cooperate with you gentlemen."

Greenberg attempted a stop thrust. "So? Were you cooperating when you attempted to kill the Hroshia without waiting for authority?"

Dreiser turned red. "That was a mistake. It has nothing to do with what I must say now."

"Which is?"

"Mrs. Stuart's son is missing. She thinks he might be with you."

"So? She's mistaken. I don't know where he is."

"Is that true, Mr. Commissioner?"

"Chief, I do not tolerate being called a liar."

Dreiser went doggedly ahead. "Sorry. But I must add this. Mrs. Stuart does not want her son to leave town. The police department backs her up a hundred per cent."

"Naturally."

"Don't mistake me, Mr. Commissioner. You are a very important. official—but you are just another citizen if you get out of line. I read that news story and I didn't like it."

"Chief, if you find that I am doing anything illegal, I urge you to do your duty."

"I shall, sir. I certainly shall."

Greenberg switched off, started again to call in, and thought better of it. If the boss had new instructions, he would send them… and Kiku despised field agents who chased back to mama whenever there was a slight shift in the wind. He must change Mrs. Stuart's mind—or hole up here for the winter.

While he was thinking the phone again signaled; he answered and found himself looking at Betty Sorenson. She smiled and said, "This is Miss Smith speaking."

"Umm…how do you do, Miss Smith."

"Well, thank you. But busy. I have a client, a Mr. Brown. He is being urged to take a trip. What he wants to know is this: he has a friend at the city of his destination; if he makes this trip, will he be allowed to see his friend?"

Greenberg thought rapidly. The other Hroshii would be around Lummox as thick as flies; it might be dangerous to let the boy go where they were and he was sure Mr. Kiku had not so intended.

Oh, the police could throw a tanglefoot field over the whole space port if necessary! The Hroshii weren't superhuman. "Tell Mr. Brown that he will see his friend."

"Thank you. Uh, Mr. Jones, where could your pilot pick us up?"

Greenberg hesitated. "It would be better for Mr. Brown to make the trip by the commercial lines. Just a moment." He found the flight schedule folder provided in most hotel rooms. "There is a ship leaving Stateport in about an hour. Could he catch it?"

"Oh, yes. But…well, there is a matter of money."

"Oh. Suppose I make you a personal loan? You, not Mr. Brown."

She broke into a grin. "That would be lovely!"

"Have you any suggestion as to how to get it to you?"

Betty did have—a snack shop called *The Chocolate Bar* across from Central High School. A few minutes later he was waiting in it, sipping a chocolate-and-milk mess. Betty showed up, he passed her an envelope and she left. He stayed there until he could no longer face the contents of his glass, then went back to the hotel.

He waited two hours, then called Mrs. Stuart. "I have just heard that your son left for Capital on his own."

He waited for her to quiet down, then added, "Mrs. Stuart, I'm still in Westville but am about to fly back to Capital. Would you care to come with me? My ship is faster than the commercial liners."

Half an hour later they left for Capital.

Mr. Kiku saw John Thomas Stuart first. Old enough to be John Thomas's grandfather, he treated John Thomas as an equal, thanking him for coming, offering refreshment. He explained briefly that Lummox was unwilling to return home unless John Thomas went along. "It is extremely important to the Hroshii that Lummox return. To us it is important for other reasons."

"You mean," John Thomas said bluntly, "that they are going to fight us if I don't? That's what the papers say."

Mr. Kiku hesitated briefly. "They may. But that is not the reason I have consulted you. I doubt if the Hroshii would attempt anything if your friend Lummox opposed it—which I think Lummox would if it was something dangerous to you, such as an attack on this planet."

"Oh, I'm sure of that, if Lummie has anything to say about it. But why should they listen to him? Uh, is he royal, or something?"

"Perhaps 'royal' will do, since we don't understand their customs. But Lummox's wishes are important."

John Thomas shook his head in wonder. "Seems funny. The way

I used to boss him around."

"In any case I am not asking you to save us from a possible war. I am thinking of positive benefits, not negative ones; we want to establish friendly relations with these people. I asked you here to find out your own wishes. If I make it possible for you to go with Lummox to their planet—Hroshijud it is called—what would your answer be? Think it over, you need not answer now."

John Thomas gulped. "I don't need to think it over. I'd go, of course."

"Don't be hasty."

"I'm not being hasty. Lummie will need me. He's never happy with strangers. Anyhow, he wants me to. You don't think I'd let him down, do you?"

"No. But this is a serious decision. You'll be going almost a thousand light-years from home."

John Thomas shrugged. "My great grandfather went there. Why shouldn't I?"

"Mmm…yes. I keep forgetting your ancestry. But aren't you interested in knowing what other human beings are going with you? Or even if there are to be any?"

"Huh?" John Thomas thought about it. "Oh, those details will work themselves out. It's not my business."

"They will be worked out," Mr. Kiku answered. He stood up. "Thank you for coming."

"Not at all, sir. Uh…when do I get to see Lummox?"

Mr. Kiku pursed his lips. "Not right away; I have matters to settle first. In the meantime, enjoy yourself. I'm assigning a man to guide you around and pay your expenses. He will act as bodyguard, too."

"A bodyguard? What for? I'm grown up."

"So you are. But, if for no other reason, I don't want you talking to reporters. Do you mind? I have no authority to tell you not to."

"Oh no, Mr. Kiku…if it will help."

"It will help."

Mr. Kiku had received John Thomas at his desk, Mrs. Stuart he received in a lavish room, one without a conference table and which had been designed by subtle psychologists to impress visitors. Mr. Kiku knew that he was in for a bad time.

He fended her off with tea and formality, forced the talk to trivia. "So good of you to come, madame. Sugar? Lemon?"

"Uh, neither, thank you. Mr. Kiku, I must make clear first off that…"

"Try these little puffs. Did Mr. Greenberg make you comfortable?"

"What? Oh, yes, a nice suite, overlooking the Gardens of Heaven. But Mr. Kiku…"

"I was sorry to ask you to come to me. But I am the prisoner of my job. You understand?" He spread his hands helplessly. "I can't leave Capital at certain times."

“That’s understandable, I suppose. Now…”

“Your kindness is appreciated. You must remain, as an official guest, as long as you see fit. Capital is worth seeing, even if one has seen it often…which no doubt you have. I understand that the shopping is excellent, too.”

“Well, as a matter of fact I haven’t seen it before. Some of the shops do look intriguing.”

“Then enjoy it, dear lady. No reason not to mix pleasure with business. Which brings us to business, I suppose. I have been talking with your son.”

“Mr. Kiku…”

“Indulge me, I will be brief. We are sending an extensive cultural and scientific mission to the home planet of the Hroshii. I want to send your son as a special aide. He has agreed to go.” He waited for the explosion.

“Utterly unthinkable! Out of the question!”

“Why, Mrs. Stuart?”

“Mr. Kiku, what sort of inhuman beast are you? I know what you mean…you plan to turn my son, my only son, over to those monstrosities as a hostage. Unspeakable!”

He shook his head. “Ma’am, you have been misled by a wild newspaper story. Have you seen the later story? The Secretary’s speech before the Council?”

“No, but…”

“I will supply a copy. It explains how that nonsense got into print. It also affirms the ancient policy of the Federation, ‘All for One’…against the Galaxy if necessary. In this case your son is that ‘one’; he has many planets behind him. But no such issues arises; your son will join a peaceful mission to a friendly people. He will help build a cultural bridge between two civilized but very different races.”

“Hmmph! The paper said that these Hroshii demanded that you turn my son over to them. Explain *that* if you can!”

“Difficulties of translation. They asked for your son by name, but on behalf of that Hroshia which was for years part of your own household, Lummox. Because Lummox is deeply attached to your son. This friendship between these two, transcending form and kind and source and mind, is one of the greatest fortunes which has happened to our race since our people first discovered that we were not sole heirs of the Almighty. This unlikely circumstance will let us bridge in one leap a chasm of misunderstanding ordinarily spanned by years of trial and tragic error.” He paused. “One is tempted to think of them as children of destiny.”

Mrs. Stuart snorted. “‘Destiny’! Fiddlesticks!”

“Can you be sure, ma’am?”

“I can be sure of this: my son is *not* going to the other side of nowhere. In another week he is entering college, which is where he belongs.”

“Is it his education which worries you, ma’am?”

“What? Why, of course. I want him to get a good education. His father set up a trust fund for it; I intend to carry out his wishes.”

“I can put your mind at rest. In addition to an embassy, we will send a cultural mission, a scientific mission, an economics and trade mission, and many specialists, all topflight minds. No single college could hire such an aggregation of talent; even the largest institutions of learning would be hard put to match it. Your son will be taught, not casually but systematically. If he earns a degree, it will be awarded by, uh…by the Institute of Outer Sciences.” He smiled. “Does that suit you?”

“Why, I never heard of such a silly arrangement. Anyway, the Institute isn’t a college.”

“It can bestow a degree. Or, if not, we will have its charter amended. But degrees are unimportant, ma’am, the point his that your son will have an unparalleled higher education. I understand that he wishes to study xenic science. Well, not only will his teachers be the finest possible, but also he will live in a new field laboratory of xenology and take part in the research. We know little of the Hroshii; he will labor on the frontiers of science.”

“He’s not going to study xenology.”

“Eh? He told Mr. Greenberg that he meant to.”

“Oh, he has that silly idea but I have no intention of indulging him. He will study some sound profession—the law, probably.”

Mr. Kiku’s brows went up. “Please, Mrs. Stuart,” he said plaintively. “Not that. I am a lawyer—he might wind up where I am.”

She looked at him sharply. He went on, “Will you tell me why you plan to thwart him?”

“But I won’t be… No, I see no reason why I should. Mr. Kiku, this discussion is useless.”

“I hope not, ma’am. May I tell a story?” He assumed consent and went on, “These Hroshii are most unlike us. What is commonplace to us is strange to them, and vice versa. All we seem to have in common is that both races are intelligent.

“To us they seem unfriendly, so remote that I would despair, were it not for one thing. Can you guess what that is?”

“What? No, I can’t”

“Your son and Lummox. They prove that the potential is there if we will only dig for it. But I digress. More than a hundred years ago a young Hroshia encountered a friendly stranger, went off with him. You know our half of that story. Let me tell you their side, as I have learned it with the help of an interpreter and our xenologists. This little Hroshia was important to them; they wanted her back very badly. Their patterns are not ours; they interweave six distinct sorts of a genetic scheme we will be a long time understanding.

“This little Hroshia had a role to play, a part planned more than two thousand years ago, around the time of Christ. And her part was

a necessary link in a larger planning, a shaping of the race that has been going on, I am told, for thirty-eight thousand of our years. Can you grasp that, Mrs. Stuart? I find it difficult. A plan running back to when Cro-Magnon man was disputing with Neanderthals for the prize of a planet…but perhaps my trouble lies in the fact that we are ourselves the shortest-lived intelligent race we have yet found.

"What would we do if a child was missing for more than a century? No need to discuss it; it in no way resembles what the Hroshii did. They were not too worried about her welfare; they did not think of her as dead…but merely misplaced. They do not die easily. They do not even starve to death. Uh, perhaps you have heard of flatworms? Euplanaria?"

"I have never taken any interest in xenobiology, Mr. Kiku."

"I made the same error, ma'am; I asked, 'What planet is it from?' Euplanaria are relatives of ours; there are many more flatworms on Earth than there are men. But they have a characteristic in common with Hroshii; both breeds grow when fed, shrink when starved…and seem to be immortal, barring accidents. I had wondered why Lummox was so much larger than the other Hroshii. No mystery… you fed Lummox too much."

"I *told* John Thomas that repeatedly!"

"No harm done. They are already shrinking her down. The Hroshii were not angry, it seems, over the theft or kidnapping or luring away of their youngster. They knew her—a lively, adventuresome disposition was part of what had been bred into her. But they did want her back and they searched for her year after year, following the single clue that she must have gone off with a certain group of visitors from space; they knew what those visitors looked like but not from what part of the sky they came.

"It would have discouraged us…but not them. I have a misty impression that the century they spent chasing rumors, asking questions, and checking strange planets was—*to them*—about what a few months would be to us. In time they found her. Again, they were neither grateful nor angry; we simply did not count.

"That might have been our only contact with the noble Hroshii had not a hitch developed; the Hroshia, now grown big but still young, refused to leave without her monstrous friend—I speak from the Hroshian viewpoint This was terrible to them, but they had no way to force her. How bitter a disappointment it was I ask you to imagine…a mating planned when Caesar fought the Gauls all now in readiness, with the other strains matured and ready…and Lummox refuses to go home. She shows no interest in her destiny…remember, she is very young; our own children do not develop social responsibility very early. In any case she won't budge without John Thomas Stuart." He spread his hands. "You see the predicament they are in?"

Mrs. Stuart set her mouth. "I'm sorry but it is no business of mine."

"True. I suppose that the simplest thing to do is to let Lummox go home…to your home, I mean…and…"

"What? Oh, no!"

"Ma'am?"

"You can't send that beast back! I won't stand for it."

Mr. Kiku stroked his chin. "I don't understand you, ma'am. It's Lummox's home; it has been the Hroshia's home much longer than it has been yours, about five times as long I believe. If I remember correctly, it isn't your property, but your son's. Am I right?"

"That has nothing to do with sit! You *can't* load me down with that beast."

"A court might decide that it was up to your son. But why cross that bridge? I am trying to find out why you oppose something so clearly to your son's advantage."

She sat silent, breathing hard, and Mr. Kiku let her sit. At last she said, "Mr. Kiku, I lost my husband to space; I won't let my son go the same way. I intend to see to it that he stays and lives on Earth."

He shook his head sadly. "Mrs. Stuart, sons are lost from the beginning."

She took out a handkerchief and dabbed at her eyes. "I can't let him go off into the sky…he's only a little boy!"

"He's a man, Mrs. Stuart. Younger men have died in battle."

"Is that what you think makes a man?"

"I know of no better gauge."

He went on, "I call my assistants 'boys' because I am an old man. You think of your son as a boy because you are, by comparison, an old woman. Forgive me. But the notion that a boy becomes a man only on a certain birthday is a mere legal fiction. Your son is a man; you have no moral right to keep him an infant."

"What a wicked thing to say! It's not true; I am merely trying to help him and guide him."

Mr. Kiku smiled grimly. "Madam, the commonest weakness of our race is our ability to rationalize our most selfish purposes. I repeat, you have no right to force him into your mold."

"I have more right than you have! I'm his mother."

"Is 'parent' the same as 'owner'? No matter, we are poles apart; you are trying to thwart him, I am helping him to do what he wants to do."

"From the basest motives!"

"My motives are not an issue and neither are yours." He stood up. "As you have already said, it seems pointless to continue. I am sorry."

"I won't let him! He's still a minor… I have rights."

"Limited rights, ma'am. He could divorce you."

She gasped. "He wouldn't do that to me! His own mother!"

"Perhaps. Our children's courts have long taken a dim view of the arbitrary use of parental authority; coercion in choice of career is usually open-and-shut. Mrs. Stuart, it is best to give into the

inevitable gracefully. Don’t oppose him too far, or you will lose him completely. He is going.”

CHAPTER XV

Undiplomatic Relations

MR. KIKU returned to his office with his stomach jumping but he did not stop to cater to it. Instead he leaned across his desk and said, “Sergei. Come in now.”

Greenberg entered and laid down two spools of sound tape. “I’m glad to get rid of these. Whoo!”

“Wipe them, please. Then forget you ever heard them.”

“Delighted.” Greenberg dipped them in a cavity. “Cripes, boss, couldn’t you have given him an anesthetic?”

“Unfortunately, no.”

“Wes Robbins was pretty rough on him. I felt like a window peeper. Why did you want me to hear them? I don’t have to deal with the mess. Or do I?”

“No. But someday you will need to know how it is done.”

“Mmmm… Boss…did you have any intention of letting it stick when he fired you?”

“Don’t ask silly questions.”

“Sorry. How did you make out with the hard case?”

“She won’t let him go.”

“So?”

“So he is going.”

“She’ll scream her head off to the papers.”

“So she will.” Mr. Kiku leaned toward his desk. “Wes?”

“Mr. Robbins is at the funeral of the Venerian foreign minister,” a female voice answered, “with the Secretary.”

“Oh, yes. Ask him to see me when he returns, please.”

“Yes, Mr. Kiku.”

“Thank you, Shizuko.” The Under Secretary turned to Greenberg. “Sergei, your acting appointment as diplomatic officer first class was made permanent when you were assigned to this affair.”

“Was it?”

“Yes. The papers will no doubt reach you. You are now being promoted to chief diplomatic officer, acting. I will hold up the permanent appointment for ninety days to let some noses get back in joint.”

Greenberg’s face showed no expression. “Nice,” he said. “But why? Because I brush my teeth regularly? Or the way I keep my brief case polished?”

“You are going to Hroshijud as deputy and chief of mission. Mr. MacClure will be ambassador, but I doubt that he will learn the tongue…which will of course place the burden of dealing with them on you. So you must acquire a working knowledge of their language at once. Follow me?”

Greenberg translated it to read: MacClure will have to talk to them through you, which keeps him in line. “Yes,” he answered thoughtfully, “but how about Dr. Ftaeml? The Ambassador will probably use him as interpreter rather than myself.” To himself he added: boss, you can’t do this to me. MacClure can short me out through Ftaeml…and there I am, nine hundred light-years from help.

“Sorry,” Kiku answered, “but I can’t spare Ftaeml. I shall retain him to interpret for the Hroshij mission they will leave behind. He accepted the job.”

Greenberg frowned. “I’ll start picking his brain in earnest, then, I’ve soaked up some Hroshija already…makes your throat raw. But when did they agree to all this? Have I slept through something? While I was in Westville?”

“They haven’t agreed. They will.”

“I admire your confidence, boss. They strike me as being as stubborn as Mrs. Stuart. Speaking of such, Ftaeml spoke to me while you were bickering with her. He says they are getting insistent about the Stuart kid. Now that you know he’s going shouldn’t we quiet them down? Ftaeml is jittery. He says the only thing that restrains them from giving us the works is that it would displease our old pal Lummox.”

“No,” answered Kiku, “we do not tell them. Nor do we tell Ftaeml. I want him to remain apprehensive.”

Greenberg chewed a knuckle. “Boss,” he said slowly, “isn’t that asking for trouble? Or do you have a hunch that they aren’t the heavyweights they claim to be? If it comes to a slugging match, can we outslug them?”

“I doubt it extremely. But the Stuart boy is my hole card.”

“I suppose so. Far be it from me to quote you-know-who…but if the risk is that great, aren’t the people entitled to know?”

“Yes. But we can’t tell them.”

“How’s that again?”

Mr. Kiku frowned. “Sergei,” he said slowly, “this society has been in crisis ever since the first rocket reached our Moon. For three centuries scientists and engineers and explorers have repeatedly broken through to new areas, new dangers, new situations; each time the political managers have had to scramble to hold things together, like a juggler with too much in the air. It’s unavoidable.

“But we have managed to keep a jury-rigged republican form of government and to maintain democratic customs. We can be proud of that. But it is not now a real democracy and it can’t be. I conceive it to be our duty to hold this society together while it adjusts to a strange and terrifying world. It would be pleasant to discuss each

problem, take a vote, then repeal it later if the collective judgment proved faulty. But it's rarely that easy. We find ourselves oftener like pilots of a ship in a life-and-death emergency. Is it the pilot's duty to hold powwows with passengers? Or is it his job to use his skill and experience to try to bring them home safely?"

"You make it sound convincing, boss. I wonder if you are right?"

"I wonder also." Mr. Kiku went on, "I intended to hold the conference with the Hroshii tomorrow morning."

"Okay. I'll tell Ftaeml. They ought to stay quiet overnight."

"But, since they are anxious, we will postpone until the following day and let them grow still more anxious." Kiku thought. "Have Ftaeml tell them this. Our customs require that a party wishing to negotiate send presents ahead; therefore they must send us presents. Tell them that the lavishness of the gifts gauge the seriousness of the matter to be discussed; too poor a gift will prejudice their petition."

Greenberg frowned. "You have some swindle in mind, but I miss the point. Ftaeml knows that our customs don't call for it."

"Can you convince him that this is a custom which he has not encountered? Or can you take him into your confidence? I see conflict in him; his loyalty is to his clients but his sympathies appear to be with us."

"I had better not try to kid him. But getting a Rargyllian to lie when he is interpreting professionally… I doubt if he can."

"Then phrase it so that it is not a lie. Tell him that it is a very old custom…which is true…and that we resort to it only on sufficiently important occasions…which this is. Give him an out, let him see your purpose, gain a sympathetic translation."

"Can do. But why, boss? Just for bulge?"

"Precisely. We are negotiating from weakness; it is imperative that we start with the upper hand. I have hopes that the symbolism of the petitioner bearing presents is as universal as we have found it to be up to now."

"Suppose they won't kick through with the loot?"

"Then we sit tight until they change their minds." Kiku added, "Start selecting your team. Let me see a list tomorrow."

Greenberg groaned. "I was going to turn in early."

"Never count on it in this business. Oh yes…as soon as the conference is over, send a good man… Peters, perhaps…up to their ship to see what changes are needed for human passengers. Then we'll tell the Hroshii what we require."

"Wait a minute, boss. I prefer one of our own ships. How do you know they've got room for us?"

"Our ships will follow. But the Hroshia Lummox goes with them and young Stuart goes with Lummox, therefore our mission goes in their ship in order that the boy will be accompanied by humans."

"I see. Sorry."

"There will be room. They will leave their own mission behind at

this same time…or no one will go. One hundred Hroshii, to pluck a figure, will certainly vacate living space for one hundred of our sort."

"In other words, boss," Greenberg said softly, "you are insisting on hostages."

"'Hostage'," Mr. Kiku said primly, "is a word that no diplomat should ever use." He turned back to his desk.

The ground floor auditorium of the Spatial Affairs building was selected for the conference because its doors were large enough and its floors strong enough. It might have been safer to hold it at the space port, as Dr. Ftaeml urged, but Mr. Kiku insisted on the Hroshii coming to him for reasons of protocol.

Their presents preceded them.

The gifts were stacked on both sides of the great hall and were lavish in quantity; their values and qualities were still unknown. The departmental xenologists were as eager as a child faced with birthday presents, but Mr. Kiku had ordered them to hold off until the conference was over.

Sergei Greenberg joined Mr. Kiku in the retiring room behind the rostrum as the Hroshii delegation entered the hall. He looked worried. "I don't like this, boss."

Kiku looked up. "Why not?"

Greenberg glanced at the others present—Mr. MacClure and a double for the Secretary General. The double, a skilled actor, nodded and went back to studying the speech he was about to deliver, but MacClure said sharply, "What's the trouble, Greenberg? Those devils up to something?"

"I hope not." Greenberg addressed Kiku, "I checked arrangements from the air and they look good. We've got the Boulevard of the Suns barricaded from here to the port and enough reserves on each side for a small war. Then I picked up the head of their column as it left the port and flew above it. They dropped off reserves of their own about every quarter of a mile and set up gear of some sort at each strong point. It might just be communication links back to their ship. I doubt it. I think it must be weapons."

"So do I," agreed Kiku.

The Secretary said worriedly, "Now look here, Mr. Kiku…"

"If you please, Mr. MacClure. Sergei, the Chief of Staff reported this earlier. I advised the Secretary General that we should make no move unless they try to pass our barricades."

"We could lose a lot of men."

"So we could. But what will *you* do, Sergei, when you are required to enter a stranger's camp to palaver? Trust him completely? Or try to cover your retreat?"

"Mmm…yes."

"I consider this the most hopeful sign we have had yet. If those are weapons, as I hope they are, it means that they do not regard us

as negligible opponents. One does not set up artillery against mice." He looked around. "Shall we go? I think we have let them stew long enough. Ready, Arthur?"

"Sure." The Secretary-General's double chucked his script aside. "That boy Robbins knows how to write a speech. He doesn't load up a sentence with sibilants and make me spray the first five rows."

"Good." They went in, the actor first, then the Secretary, then the Permanent Under Secretary followed by his assistant.

Of the long procession of Hroshii that had left the space port only a dozen had entered the auditorium, but even that number made the hall seem filled. Mr. Kiku looked down at them with interest, it being the first time that he had laid eyes on a Hroshiu. It was true, he saw, that these people did not present the golliwog friendliness shown in the pictures of the Hroshia Lummox. These were adults, even though smaller than Lummox. The one just in front of the platform and flanked by two others was staring back at him. The stare was cold and confident. Mr. Kiku found that the creature's gaze made him uneasy; he wanted to shift his eyes. Instead he stared back and reminded himself that his own hypnotherapist could do it as well or better than the Hroshiu.

Greenberg touched his elbow. "They've set up weapons in here, too," he whispered. "See that? In the back?"

Mr. Kiku answered, "We are not supposed to know that it is a weapon. Assume that it is apparatus for their own record of the conference." Dr. Ftaeml was standing beside the foremost Hroshiu; the Under Secretary said to him, "Tell them what our Secretary General is. Describe him as chief of seventeen powerful planets."

The Rargyllian hesitated. "What about the President of your Council?"

"The Secretary General embodies both of them for this occasion."

"Very well, my friend." The Rargyllian spoke in high-pitched speech which reminded Kiku of puppies whining. The Hroshiu answered him briefly in the same tongue, and suddenly Mr. Kiku no longer felt the dread that had been inspired by the creature's stare. It was not possible to feel awe for a person who sounded like a lonesome puppy. But he reminded himself that deadly orders could be given in any speech.

Ftaeml was speaking. "Here beside me is…" He broke into a multiple squeal of the strange tongue. "…who is commander of the ship and the expedition. She…no, perhaps 'he' would be better…he is hereditary marshal and…" The Rargyllian broke off and fretted. "You have no equivalent rank. Perhaps I should say 'mayor of the palace.'"

Greenberg suddenly said, "How about 'boss,' Doc?"

"A happy suggestion! Yes, this is the Boss. Her…his social position is not highest but his practical authority is almost without limit."

Kiku asked, “Is his authority such that he may conduct plenipotentiary bargaining?”

“Ah, yes, certainly!”

“Then we will get on with it.” He turned to the actor and nodded. Then he spoke to the desk in front of him, using a hush circuit: “Getting all this?”

A voice answered his ears alone. “Yes, sir. The picture pick-up faded once but it’s all right now.”

“Are the Secretary General and the Chief of Staff listening?”

“I believe so, sir. Their offices are monitoring.”

“Very well” Mr. Kiku listened to the Secretary General’s speech. It was short but delivered with great dignity and the actor paced it so that Ftaeml might translate. The Secretary General welcomed the Hroshii to Earth, assured them that the peoples of the Federation were happy that the Hroshii had at long last found their lost sibling, and added that this happy accident should be the occasion for the Hroshii to take their rightful place in the Community of Civilizations.

He sat down and promptly went to sleep for all practical purposes, eyes open and face fixed in kindly dignity. The double could hold this Roman-Emperor pose for hours without really noticing the review, or ceremony, or whatever he might be chaperoning.

Mr. MacClure spoke briefly, seconding the Secretary General and adding that the Federation was now prepared to discuss any matters of business between the Federation and the noble Hroshii.

Greenberg leaned to Kiku and whispered, “Should we clap, boss? Somebody ought to and I don’t think they know how.”

“Shut up,” Kiku said amiably. “Dr. Ftaeml, does the commander have a speech of formality to deliver?”

“I think not.” Ftaeml spoke to the leading Hroshiu, then answered, “The reply is a serious comment on the two speeches made, rather than an answer of formality. He states that the Hroshii have no need of other…lesser…breeds and says we should now get to business without further, ah…trivia.”

“If it is true that they have no need for other peoples, please ask him why they have come to us and why they have offered us presents?”

“But you insisted on it, my friend,” Ftaeml answered in surprise.

“Thank you, Doctor, but I do not want your comment. Require him to answer. Please do not coach him.”

“I will try.” Ftaeml exchanged several sentences of the high whining with the Hroshij commander, then turned back to Kiku. “Forgive me. He says that he acceded to your childishness as the simplest means of accomplishing his purpose. He wishes to discuss now the surrender of John Thomas Stuart.”

“Please tell him that the matter is not open to discussion. The agenda requires that we first settle the question of diplomatic

relations."

"Pardon me, sir. 'Diplomatic relations' is a concept difficult to translate. I have been working on it for days."

"Tell him that what he sees now is an example of diplomatic relations. Free peoples, negotiating as equals, with peaceful intentions, to their mutual benefit."

The Rargyllian simulated a sigh. "Each of those concepts is almost equally difficult. I will try."

Presently he answered, "The hereditary marshal says that if what we are doing constitutes diplomatic relations you have them now. Where is the Stuart boy?"

"Not so fast. The agenda must be taken up point by point. They must accept an embassy and a mixed mission for cultural, scientific, and trade purposes. They must leave with us a similar embassy and mission. Regular travel between our two sovereignties must be planned. Not until these are disposed of can there be any mention of the Stuart boy."

"I will try again." Ftaeml spoke to the 'Boss' Hroshiu at length; the reply was short. "He tells me to tell you that all those points are rejected as not worthy of consideration. Where is the Stuart boy?"

"In that case," Mr. Kiku answered quietly, "tell them that we do not bargain with barbarians. Tell them to pick up the trash—be sure of forceful translation!—with which they have littered our home, and get quickly back to their ship. They are required to take off at once. They must bundle their precious Hroshia aboard, by force if need be, if they ever expect to see her again—they will never again be allowed to land."

Ftaeml looked as if he were about to burst into tears he was incapable of shedding. "Please! I beg you not to antagonize them. I tell tales out of school… I go beyond my professional duties…but they could now destroy this city without recourse to their ship."

"Deliver the message. The conference is ended." Mr. Kiku stood up, picked up the others with his eyes, and headed for the retiring room.

The double went ahead. MacClure caught Kiku by the arm and fell into step. "Henry…you're running this, granted. But shouldn't you talk it over? They're savage beasts. It could…"

"Mr. MacClure," Kiku said softly, "as a distinguished predecessor once said, in dealing with certain types you must step on their toes until *they* apologize." He urged the Secretary toward the door.

"But suppose they won't?"

"That is the hazard. Please…let us not argue in their presence." They went into the retiring room; the door closed behind them.

Greenberg turned to Kiku. "Nice try, boss…but what do we do now?"

"We wait."

"Okay." Greenberg went nervously to a wall relay, picked up the

scene inside the auditorium. The Hroshii had not left. He could just make out Ftaeml, surrounded by creatures much larger than the medusoid.

The double said to Kiku, “Through with me, sir?”

“Yes, Arthur. A good job.”

“Thanks. I’ve got time to get this make-up off and catch the second game of the doubleheader.”

“Good. Perhaps you had better change your appearance here.”

“Shucks, the photographers know. They play along.”

He left, whistling. MacClure sat down, lit a cigar, took a puff, put it down. “Henry, you ought to notify the Chief of Staff.”

“He knows. We wait.”

They waited. Greenberg said suddenly, “Here comes Ftaeml.” He hurried to the door and let the Rargyllian in.

Dr. Ftaeml seemed very tense. “My dear Mr. Kiku—the Hroshij commander states that they will agree to your strange wishes for sake of prompt settlement. He insists that you now deliver the Stuart boy.”

“Please tell him that he misunderstands entirely the nature of friendly relations between civilized people. We do not barter the freedom of one of our citizens against their worthless favors, even as they would not barter the freedom of their Hroshia Lummox. Then tell him that I order them to leave at once.”

Ftaeml said earnestly, “I reluctantly deliver your message.”

He was back quickly. “They agree to your terms.”

“Good. Come, Sergei… Mr. MacClure, there is no need for you to appear unless it suits you.” He went out into the hall, followed by Greenberg and Ftaeml.

The Hroshij “boss,” it seemed to Kiku was more baleful than ever. But the details went promptly forward—an equal number of Hroshii and of humans to constitute the, missions, passage to be provided in the Hroshij ship, one of the Hroshii there present to be ambassador to the Federation. Ftaeml assured them that this Hroshiu was of practical rank second only to the expedition commander.

And now, said the Hroshij commander, it is time to turn over to us John Thomas Stuart. Ftaeml added anxiously, “I trust you have made arrangements, my friend? I dislike the tenor of this. It has been too easy.”

With a feeling of satisfaction soothing his troubled stomach Mr. Kiku answered, “I see no difficulty. The Stuart boy is willing to go, now that we are assured of civilized relations. Please make sure that they understand that he goes as a free being, not a slave, not a pet. The Hroshii must guarantee his status and his return passage, in one of their own ships, whenever he so wishes.”

Ftaeml translated. Presently he answered. “All of that is satisfactory except for something which I will translate as a ‘minor detail.’ The Stuart boy will be a member of the household of the Hroshia Lummox. Naturally—I translate here most carefully—

naturally the question of the boy returning, if ever, is a personal prerogative of the Hroshia Lummox. Should she grow tired of him and wish to return him, a ship would be made available."

"No."

"No what, sir?"

"A simple negative. The subject of the Stuart boy is finished."

Ftaeml turned back to his clients.

"They say," he answered presently, "that there is no treaty."

"I know that. Treaties are not signed with…they have a word meaning 'servant'?"

"They have servants of several sorts, some higher, some lower."

"Use the word for the lowest sort. Tell them that there is no treaty because servants have no power to treat. Tell them to go and be quick about it."

Ftaeml looked, at Kiku sadly. "I admire you, my friend, but I do not envy you." He turned to the expedition commander and whined for several moments.

The Hroshiu opened his mouth wide, looked at Kiku, and squealed like a kicked puppy. Ftaeml gave a start and moved away. "Very bad profanity, untranslatable…" The monster continued to make noises; Ftaeml tried frantically to translate: "Contempt…lower animal…eat you with relish…follow back your ancestors and eat them as well…your despicable race must be taught manners…kidnappers…child stealers…" He stopped in great agitation.

The Hroshiu lumbered toward the platform, reared up until he was eye to eye with Mr. Kiku. Greenberg slid a hand under his desk and located a control that would throw a tanglefoot field over the lower floor…a permanent installation; the hall had seen other disturbances.

But Mr. Kiku sat like stone. They eyed each other, the massive thing from "Out There" and the little elderly human. Nothing moved in the great hall, nothing was said.

Then from the back of the hall broke out a whining as if a whole basket of puppies had been disturbed at once. The Hroshij commander whirled around, making the floor shake, and shrilled to his retainers. He was answered and he whined back sharp command. All twelve Hroshii swarmed out the door moving with speed incredible for beings so ungainly.

Kiku stood up and watched them. Greenberg grabbed his arm. "Boss! The Chief of Staff is trying to reach you."

Kiku shook him off. "Tell him not to be hasty. It is most important that he not be hasty. Is our car waiting?"

CHAPTER XVI

"Sorry We Messed Things Up"

JOHN THOMAS STUART XI had wanted to attend the conference; it required a flat refusal to keep him away. He was in the Hotel Universal in the suite provided for him and his mother, playing checkers with his bodyguard, when Betty Sorenson showed up with Miss Holtz. Myra Holtz was an operative for BuSec of DepSpace, and concealed her policewoman profession under a pleasant façade. Mr. Kiku's instructions to her concerning Betty had been: "Keep a sharp eye on her. She has a taste for excitement."

The two guards greeted each other; Betty said, "Hi, Johnnie. Why aren't you over at the heap big smoke?"

"They wouldn't let me."

"Me, too." She glanced around. "Where's the Duchess?"

"Gone shopping. I'm still getting the silent treatment. Seventeen hats she's bought. What have you done to your face?"

Betty turned to a mirror. "Like it? It's called 'Cosmic Contouring' and it's the latest thing."

"Makes you look like a zebra with the pip."

"Why, you country oaf. Ed, you like it. Don't you?"

Ed Cowen looked up from the checker board and said hastily, "I wouldn't know. My wife says I have no taste."

"Most men haven't. Johnnie, Myra and I have come to invite you two to go out on the town. How about it?"

Cowen answered, "I don't favor that, Myra."

"It was her idea," Miss Holz answered.

John Thomas said to Cowen, "Why not? I'm sick of checkers."

"Well… I'm supposed to keep in touch with the office. They might want you any time now."

"Pooh!" put in Betty. "You carry a bodyphone. Anyhow Myra does."

Cowen shook his head. "Let's play it safe."

"Am I under arrest?" Betty persisted. "Is Johnnie?"

"Mmm…no. It's more protective custody."

"Then you can protectively cuss him wherever be is. Or stay here and play checkers with yourself. Come on, Johnnie."

Cowen looked at Miss Holtz; she answered slowly, "I suppose it's all right, Ed. We'll be with them."

Cowen shrugged and stood up. Johnnie said to Betty, "I'm not going out in public with you looking like that. Wash your face."

“But Johnnie! It took two hours to put it on.”

“The taxpayers paid for it, didn’t they?”

“Well, yes, but…”

“Wash your face. Or we go nowhere. Don’t you agree, Miss Holtz?”

Special Operative Holtz had only a flower pattern adorning her left cheek, aside from the usual tinting. She said thoughtfully, “Betty doesn’t need it. Not at her age.”

“Oh, you’re a couple of Puritans!” Betty said bitterly, stuck her tongue at Johnnie and slouched into the bath. She came out with her face glowing pink from scrubbing. “Now I’m stark naked. Let’s go.”

There was another tussle at the lift, which Ed Cowen won. They went to the roof to take an air taxi for sightseeing, instead of going down to the streets. “Both you kids have had your faces spread around the papers the past few days. And this town has more crackpots than a second-hand shop. I don’t want any incidents.”

“If you hadn’t let them bully me, my face wouldn’t be recognizable.”

“But his would.”

“We could paint him, too. Any male face would be improved with make-up.” But she entered the lift and they took an air taxi.

“Where to, Chief?”

“Oh,” said Cowen, “cruise around and show us sights. Put it on the hourly rate.”

“You’re the doctor. I can’t fly across the Boulevard of Suns. Some parade, or something.”

“I know.”

“Look,” put in Johnnie, “take us to the space port.”

“No,” Cowen corrected. “Not out there.”

“Why not, Ed? I haven’t seen Lummox yet. I want to look at him. He may not be well.”

“That’s one thing you can’t do,” Cowen told him. “The Hroshii ship is out of bounds.”

“Well, I can see him from the air, can’t I?”

“No!”

“But…”

“Never mind him,” Betty advised. “We’ll get another taxi. I’ve got money, Johnnie. So long, Ed.”

“Look,” complained the driver. “I’ll take you to Timbuctu. But I can’t hang around over a landing flat. The cops get rude about it.”

“Head for the space port,” Cowen said resignedly.

There was a barricade around the many acres assigned to the Hroshii except where it had been broken to let their delegation enter the Boulevard of Suns, and even then the barricade joined others carrying on down the avenue toward the administrative group. Inside the enclosure the landing craft of the Hroshii sat squat and ugly, almost as large as a terrestrial star ship. Johnnie looked at it and wondered what it was going to be like to be on Hroshijud. He was

uncomfortable at the thought, not because he was fearful but because he had not yet told Betty that he was going. He had started a couple of times but it had not worked out right.

Since she had not raised the subject he assumed that she did not know.

There were other sightseers in the air, and a crowd, not very thick, outside the barricade. No single wonder lasted long in Capital; its residents prided themselves on being blasé and in fact, the Hroshii were not fantastic compared with a dozen other friendly races, some of them members of the Federation.

The Hroshii swarmed around the base of their ship, doing unexplained things with artifacts they had erected. Johnnie tried to estimate their number, found it like guessing beans in a bottle. Dozens, surely…how many more?

The taxi cruised just outside the point patrol of police air cars. Johnnie suddenly called out, “Hey! There’s Lummie!”

Betty craned her neck. “Where, Johnnie?”

“Coming into sight on the far side of their ship. There!” He turned to the driver. “Say, mister, could you put us around on the far side as close in as they’ll let you?”

The driver glanced at Cowen, who nodded. They swung around, the police sentries and came in toward the Hroshij craft from the far side. The driver picked a point between two police cars and back a little. Lummox could be seen clearly now, closely attended by a group of Hroshii and towering over them.

“I wish I had binox,” Johnnie complained. “I can’t really *see*.”

“Pair in the glove compartment,” offered the driver. Johnnie got them out. They were a simple optical type, without electronic magnification, but they brought Lummox up much closer. He stared into his friend’s face.

“How does Lummie look, Johnnie?”

“Okay. Kind of skinny, though. I wonder if they are feeding him right?”

“Mr. Greenberg tells me they aren’t feeding Lummie at all. I thought you knew?”

“What? They can’t do that to Lummie!”

“I don’t see what we can do about it.”

“Well…” John Thomas lowered the window and tried to get a better look. “Say, can’t you take it in closer? And lower maybe? I want to give him a good checking over.”

Cowen shook his head. The driver grumbled, “I don’t want no words with the cops.” But he did move in a little closer until he was lined up with the police cars.

Almost at once the speaker in the car’s overhead blared, “Hey, you! Number four eighty-four! Where do you think you’re going with that can? Drag it out of there!”

The driver muttered and started to obey. John Thomas, still with the glasses to his eyes, said, “Aw!”…then added, “I wonder if he can

hear me? Lummie!" he shouted into the wind. "Oh Lummox!"

The Hroshia raised her head and looked wildly around.

Cowen grabbed John Thomas and reached for the window closure; But Johnnie shook free. "Oh, you go fry eggs!" he said angrily. "I've been pushed around long enough. *Lummox!* It's Johnnie, boy! Over here! Come over this way…"

Cowen dragged him inside and slammed the window shut. "I knew we shouldn't have come out. Driver, let's get out of here."

"Only too happy!"

"But hold it just back of the police lines. I want to check on this."

"Make up your mind."

It needed no binoculars to see what was happening. Lummox headed straight for the barrier, on a bee line with the taxi, scattering other Hroshii right and left. On reaching the barrier no attempt was made to flow over it; Lummox went through it.

"Jumping jeepers!" Cowen said softly. "But the tanglefoot will stop her."

It did not. Lummox slowed down, but one mighty foot followed another, as if the charged air had been deep mud. With the persistence of a glacier the Hroshia was seeking the point most closely under the taxi.

And more Hroshii were pouring out the gap. They made still heavier weather of the immobilizing field, but still they came. As Cowen watched, Lummox broke free of the zone and came on at a gallop, with people scattering ahead of her.

Cowen snapped, "Myra, get through on another circuit to the military! I'll call the office."

Betty grabbed his sleeve. "No!"

"Huh? You again! Shut up or you'll get the back of my hand."

"Mr. Cowen, will you *listen*." She went on hastily, "It's no good calling for help. There isn't anybody who can make Lummox listen but Johnnie—and *they* won't listen to anybody but Lummox. You *know* that. So put him down where he can talk to Lummie—or you're going to have a lot of people hurt and it will be all your fault."

Security Operative First Class Edwin Cowen stared at her and reviewed in his mind his past career and future hopes. Then he made a brave decision almost instantly. "Take her down," he snapped. "Land her and let the kid and me out."

The driver groaned. "I'm charging extra for this." But he landed the car so fast that it jarred them. Cowen snatched the door open and he and John Thomas burst out; Myra Holtz tried to grab Betty, was unsuccessful. She herself jumped out as the driver was already raising.

"Johnnie!" squealed Lummox and held out mighty arms in a universal gesture of welcome.

John Thomas ran to the star beast. "Lummie! Are you all right?"

"Sure," agreed Lummox. "Why not? Hi, Betty."

"Hi, Lummie."

"Hungry, though," Lummox added thoughtfully.

"We'll change that."

"It's all right. I'm not supposed to eat now."

John Thomas started to answer this amazing statement when he noticed Miss Holtz ducking away from one of the Hroshii. Others were milling around as if uncertain how to treat this development. When Johnnie saw Ed Cowen draw his gun and place himself between the Hroshiu and Myra he said suddenly, "Lummox! These are my friends. Tell your friends to leave them alone and get back inside. Quickly!"

"Whatever you say, Johnnie." The Hroshia spoke in the whining speech to her kin; at once she was obeyed.

"And make us a saddle. We'll go with you and have a long talk."

"Sure, Johnnie."

They got aboard, Johnnie giving Betty a hand up, and started in through the break in the barrier. When Lummox struck the tanglefoot field again they stopped and Lummox spoke sharply to one of the others.

That Hroshiu called out to one inside; the tanglefoot field disappeared. They moved on in without difficulty.

When Mr. Kiku, Sergei Greenberg, and Dr Ftaeml arrived they found an armed truce, tense on both sides. All the Hroshii were back inside the broken barrier; military craft in quantity had replaced the police patrol and far overhead, out of sight, bombers were ready in final extremity to turn the area into a radioactive desert.

The Secretary General and the Chief of Staff met them at the barricade. The Secretary General looked grave. "Ah, Henry. It seems we have failed. Not your fault."

Mr. Kiku looked out at the massed Hroshii. "Perhaps." The Chief of Staff added, "We are evacuating the blast radius as rapidly as possible. But if we have to do it, I don't know what we can do for those two youngsters in there."

"Then let's not do anything, shall we? Not yet."

"I don't think you understand the seriousness of the situation, Mr. Under Secretary. For example, we placed an immobilizing locus entirely around this area. It's gone. They cancelled it out. Not just here. Everywhere."

"So. Perhaps *you* do not understand the seriousness of the situation, General. In any case, a few words can do no harm. Come, Sergei. Coming, Doctor?" Mr. Kiku left the group around the Secretary General and headed for the break in the barricade. Wind sweeping across the miles-wide field forced him to clutch his hat. "I do not like wind," he complained to Dr. Ftaeml. "It is disorderly."

"There is a stronger wind ahead," the Rargyllian answered soberly. "My friend, is this wise? They will not hurt me; I am their employee. But you…"

“What else can I do?”

“I do not know. But there are situations in which courage is useless.”

“Possibly. I’ve never found one yet.”

“One finds such a situation but once.”

They were approaching the solid mass of Hroshii around Lummox. They could make out the two humans on the back of the Hroshia a good hundred yards beyond. Kiku stopped. “Tell them to get out of my way. I wish to approach the Hroshia Lummox.”

Ftaeml translated. Nothing happened, though the Hroshii stirred uneasily. Greenberg said, “Boss, how about asking Lummox and the kids to come out here? That crowd doesn’t smell friendly.”

“No. I dislike shouting into this wind. Please call out to the Stuart lad and tell him to have them make way.”

“Okay, boss. It will be fun to tell my grandchildren—if I have grandchildren.” He cupped his mouth and shouted, “Johnnie! John Stuart! Tell Lummox to have them clear a path.”

“Sure!”

A path wide enough for a column of troops opened as if swept with a broom. The little procession moved down the ranks of Hroshii. Greenberg felt goose flesh crawl up and down his back.

Mr. Kiku’s only worry seemed to be keeping his hat on in the wind. He swore primly while clutching at his head. They stopped in front of Lummox. “Howdy, Mr. Kiku,” John Thomas called out. “Shall we come down?”

“Perhaps it would be best.”

Johnnie slid off, then caught Betty. “Sorry we messed things up.”

“So am I. If you did. Will you introduce me to your friend, please?”

“Oh, sure. Lummox, this is Mr. Kiku. He’s a nice fellow, a friend of mine.”

“How do you do, Mr. Kiku.”

“How do you do, Lummox.” Mr. Kiku looked, thoughtful. “Doctor, is not that the commander, there by the Hroshia? The one with the ugly glint in his eye?”

The Rargyllian looked. “Yes, it is he.”

“Um. Ask him if he has reported the conference to his mistress.”

“Very well.” The medusoid spoke to the Hroshij commander, was answered. “He says not.”

“Um. John Thomas, we concluded a treaty with the Hroshii to permit all that I discussed with you. Suddenly they repudiated the agreement when they discovered that we would not surrender your person without guarantees. Will you help me find out if such were the wishes of your friend?”

“You mean Lummox? Sure.”

“Very well. Wait a moment. Dr. Ftaeml, will you report the essentials of our agreement to the Hroshia Lummox—in the presence of the commander? Or are the concepts beyond her?”

“Eh? Why should they be? She was perhaps two hundred of your years old when she was brought here.”

“So much? Well, speak ahead.”

The Rargyllian commenced the curious whines of the Hroshij tongue, addressing Lummox. Once or twice Lummox interrupted, then allowed him to continue. When Dr. Ftaeml had finished she spoke to the expedition commander. Ftaeml said to the humans, “She asks, ‘Can this be true?’”

The commander made as wide a circle as space permitted, crept up in front of her, with the little group representing the Federation giving way. His legs were retracted so that he crawled like a caterpillar. Without lifting his head from the ground he whined his answer.

“He is admitting the truth but pleading necessity.”

“I wish he would hurry with it,” Kiku fretted. “I’m getting chilly.” His thin knees trembled.

“She is not accepting the explanation. I will spare you the exact tenor of her language—but her rhetoric is superb.”

Suddenly Lummox spat out one squeal, then reared up with four legs clear of the ground. With arms retracted the great beast swung down her head and struck the unfortunate commander a smashing sidewise blow.

It lifted him off the ground, bowled him into the crowd. Slowly he regained his feet, slunk back to the spot in front of Lummox.

Lummox began to speak. “She is saying… I wish you could hear this in *her* language!…that so long as the Galaxy shall last the friends of Johnnie are her friends. She adds that those who are not friends of her friends are nothing, less than nothing, never to be suffered in her sight. She commands this in the names of…it is a recitation of her ancestry with all its complicated branches and is somewhat tedious. Shall I attempt to translate?”

“Don’t bother,” Mr. Kiku told him. “‘Yes’ is ‘yes’ in any language.”

“But she tells it with great beauty,” Ftaeml said. “She is recalling to them things dreadful and wonderful, reaching far into the past.”

“I am interested only in how it affects the future…and in getting out of this pesky wind.” Mr. Kiku sneezed. “Oh dear!”

Dr. Ftaeml took his cape off and hung it around Mr. Kiku’s narrow shoulders. “My friend…my brother. I am sorry.”

“No, no, you will be cold.”

“Not I.”

“Let us share it, then.”

“I am honored,” the medusoid answered softly, his tendrils twitching with emotion. He spread it around them and they huddled together while Lummox finished her peroration. Betty turned to Johnnie.

“That’s more than you ever did for me.”

“Now, Slugger, you know you’re never cold.”

“Well, put your arm around me at least.”

“Huh? In front of everybody? Go snuggle up to Lummox.”

While speaking Lummox had stayed reared up. As the oration progressed the assembled Hroshii sank down, retracting their legs until they were all in the humble position of the commander. At last it was over and Lummox added one sharp remark. The Hroshii stirred and began to move. “She says,” translated Ftaeml, “that she now wishes to be alone with her friends.”

“Ask her;” directed Kiku, “please to assure her friend John Thomas that all she has said is true and binding.”

“Very well.” As the other Hroshii hurried away Ftaeml spoke briefly to Lummox.

Lummox listened, then turned to John Thomas. Out of the great mouth came the piping, little-girl voice. “That’s right, Johnnie. Cross my heart.”

John Thomas nodded solemn agreement. “Don’t worry, Mr. Kiku. You can depend on it.”

CHAPTER XVII

Ninety-Seven Pickle Dishes

"SEND her in."

Mr. Kiku composed himself nervously, giving the tea tray one last glance, making sure that the intimate little conference room was all that he wished of it. While he was thus fussing a door dilated and Betty Sorenson walked in, said sweetly, "Hello, Mr. Kiku," and seated herself with composure.

He said, "How do you do, Miss Sorenson?"

"Call me Betty. My friends all do."

"Thank you. I would wish to be one." He looked her over and shuddered. Betty had been experimenting with a new design of bars; it made her face somewhat like a checker board. Besides that she had evidently been shopping and was dressed in styles far too old for her. Mr. Kiku was forced to remind himself that customs varied. "Um… my dear young lady, the purpose of this consultation is somewhat difficult to explain."

"Make it easy on yourself. I'm in no hurry."

"Will you have tea?"

"Let me pour for us. It's chummier." He allowed her to, then sat back with his cup in a relaxed attitude he did not feel.

"I trust you have been enjoying your stay?"

"Oh my, yes! I've never been able to shop before without counting pennies. Everybody should have an expense account."

"Enjoy it I assure you it will never show in the annual budget… literally. Our discretionary fund. Uh, you are an orphan, are you not?"

"A legal orphan. I'm a Free Child. My guardian is the Westville Home for Free Children. Why?"

"Then you are not of age?"

"Depends on how you look at it. I think I am, the court says I'm not. But it won't be long now, thank goodness."

"Um, yes. Perhaps I should say that I knew all this,"

"I figured you did. What's it all about?"

"Um. Perhaps I should tell a little story. Did you ever raise rabbits? Or cats?"

"I've had cats."

"We have run into a difficulty with the Hroshia we know as Lummox. Nothing disastrous; our treaty with them is not affected, since she has given her word. But, uh, shall we say that if we could

oblige Lummox in a certain matter, it would make for better feelings, better future relations?"

"I suppose we shall say so, if you say so. What is it, Mr. Kiku?"

"Um. We are both aware that this Hroshia Lummox has long been a pet of John Thomas Stuart."

"Why, certainly. It worked out funny, didn't it?"

"Um, yes. And that Lummox was the pet of John Thomas's father before him, and so on for four generations."

"Yes, of course. Nobody could want a sweeter pet."

"Now, that is just the point, Miss Sorenson… Betty. That is the point of view of John Thomas and his forebears. But there are always at least two points of view. From the viewpoint of Lummox she…he…was not a pet. Quite the contrary. John Thomas was his pet. Lummox was engaged in raising John Thomases."

Betty's eyes widened, then she started to laugh and choked. "Mr. Kiku! Oh *no!*"

"I am quite serious. It is a matter of viewpoint and made more reasonable by considering relative lifetimes. Lummox had raised several generations of John Thomases. It was Lummox's only hobby and principal interest. Childish, but Lummox was, and still is, a child."

Betty got herself under control to the point where she could talk through giggles. "'Raising John Thomases.' Does Johnnie know about this?"

"Well, yes, but I explained it to him somewhat differently."

"Does Mrs. Stuart know about this?"

"Ah… I haven't found it necessary to tell her."

"May I tell her? I want to see her face. 'John Thomases'…oh my!"

"I think that would be cruel," Mr. Kiku answered stiffly.

"I suppose so. All right, I won't do it. But I can dream about it, can't I?"

"We all can dream. But to continue: Lummox appears to have been perfectly happy with this innocent hobby. It was the Hroshia's intention to continue it indefinitely. That was the reason that we found ourselves faced with this curious dilemma of being unable to get the Hroshii to leave after their sibling had been restored. Lummox wished to continue, uh, raising John Thomases." He hesitated.

Finally Betty said, "Well, Mr. Kiku? Go on."

"Uh, what are your own plans, Betty… Miss Sorenson?"

"Mine? I haven't discussed them with anyone."

"Um. Pardon me if I was unduly personal. You see, there are requirements in any endeavor and Lummox, it appears, is aware of one of the requirements…uh, let's put it this way. If we have here a rabbit…or a cat…" He stopped dead, unable to go on.

She searched his unhappy face. "Mr. Kiku, are you trying to say that it takes two rabbits to have more rabbits?"

"Well, yes. That was part of it."

"Now, really! Why make such a fuss about it? Everybody knows it. I suppose the rest is that Lummox knows that the same rule applies to John Thomases?"

He could only nod dumbly.

"You poor dear, you should have written me a note about it. It would have been less of a strain on you. I suppose I'll have to help you with the rest, too. You thought I might figure in this plan?"

"I had no wish to intrude…but I did want to sound out your intentions."

"Am I going to marry John Thomas? I've never had any other intention. Of course."

Mr. Kiku sighed. "Thank you."

"Oh, I won't be doing it to please you."

"Oh no! I was thanking you for assisting me."

"Thank Lummie. Good old Lummie! You can't fool Lummox."

"I take it that this is all settled?"

"Huh? I haven't proposed to him yet. But I will… I was waiting until it was a little nearer time for the ship to leave. You know how men are—nervous and skittery. I didn't want to leave him time to worry. Did your wife propose to you right off? Or did she wait until you were ripe for the kill?"

"Uh, well, the customs of my people are somewhat different. Her father arranged it with my father."

Betty looked shocked. "Slavery," she stated baldly.

"No doubt. However I have not been unhappy under it." He stood up. "I'm glad that we have concluded our talk so amiably."

"Just a moment, Mr. Kiku. There are one or two other matters. Just what are you doing for John Thomas?"

"Eh?"

"What's the contract?"

"Oh. Financially we mean to be liberal. He will devote most of his time to his education, but I had thought of giving him a nominal title in the embassy—special attaché, or assistant secretary, or some such."

Betty remained silent. "Of course, since you are going along, it might be well to give you a semi-official status, too. Say special aide, with the same salary? It would give you two a nice nest egg if you return…when you return."

She shook her head. "Johnnie isn't ambitious. I am."

"Yes?"

"Johnnie is to be ambassador to the Hroshii."

Mr. Kiku had grave trouble talking. At last he managed to say, "My dear young lady. Quite impossible."

"That's what you think. Look, Mr. MacClure got cold feet and welched on you, didn't he? Don't beat around the bush; by now I have my connections inside your department. He did. Therefore the job is open. It's for Johnnie."

“But, my dear,” he said weakly, “it is not a job for an untrained boy…much as I think of Mr. Stuart.”

“MacClure was going to be dead wood, wasn’t he? Everybody knows that. Johnnie would not be dead wood. Who knows the most about Hroshii? Johnnie.”

“My dear, I admit his special knowledge; I grant that we will make use of it. But ambassador? No.”

“Yes.”

“Chargé d’Affaires? That’s an awfully high rank, but I’m willing to stretch a point. But Mr. Greenberg must be the ambassador. We require a diplomat.”

“What’s so hard about being a diplomat? Or to put it another way, what could Mr. MacClure do that my Johnnie can’t do better?”

He sighed deeply. “You have me there. All I can say is that there are situations which I am forced to accept, knowing them to be wrong, and others that I need not accept. If you were my own daughter I would paddle you. No.”

She grinned at him. “I’ll bet I outweigh you. But that’s not the point. I don’t think you understand the situation.”

“No?”

“No. Johnnie and I are important to you in this dicker, aren’t we? Especially Johnnie.”

“Yes. Especially Johnnie. You are not essential…even in the, uh, raising of John Thomases.”

“Want to put it to a test? Do you think you can get John Thomas Stuart one half inch off this planet if I set myself against it?”

“Hmm… I wonder.”

“So do I. But I’ve got nerve enough to put it to a trial. If I win, where are you? Out on a windy field, trying to talk your way out of a mess again…without Johnnie to help you.”

Mr. Kiku went over to a window and looked out. Presently he turned. “More tea?” Betty asked politely.

“Thank you, no. Miss, do you have any idea what an ambassador extraordinary and minister plenipotentiary is?”

“I’ve heard the term.”

“It is the same rank and pay as an ambassador, except that it is a special case. This is a special case. Mr. Greenberg will be the ambassador and carry the authority; the special, and purely nominal, rank will be created for John Thomas.”

“Rank and pay,” she answered. “I’m acquiring a taste for shopping.”

“And pay,” he agreed. “Young lady, you have the morals of a snapping turtle and the crust of a bakery pie. Very well, it’s a deal… if you can get your young man to agree to it.”

She giggled. “I won’t have any trouble.”

“I didn’t mean that. I’m betting on his horse sense and natural modesty against your avarice. I think he’ll settle for assistant embassy secretary. We’ll see.”

"Oh, Yes, we'll see. By the way, where is he?"

"Eh?"

"He's not at the hotel. You have him here, don't you?"

"He is here, as a matter of fact."

"Good." She walked up and patted him on the cheek. "I like you, Mr. Kiku. Now trot Johnnie in here and leave us alone. It will take me about twenty minutes. You don't have a thing to worry about."

"Miss Sorenson," Mr. Kiku asked wonderingly, "how does it happen that you do not ask to be ambassador yourself?"

Lummox was the only non-human to attend the wedding. Mr. Kiku stood up for the bride. He noticed that she was wearing no make-up, which made him wonder if possibly the embassy's junior secretary might not be master in his own home after all.

They received the usual ninety-seven pickle dishes, mostly from strangers, and other assorted costly junk that they would not take with them, including an all-expense trip to Hawaii for which they had no possible use. Mrs. Stuart wept and had her picture taken and greatly enjoyed herself; all in all it was a very successful wedding. Mr. Kiku leaked a few tears during the responses, but Mr. Kiku was a very sentimental man.

He was sitting at his desk the next morning, ignoring lights, with his Kenya-farm brochures spread out before him, but he was not looking at them. Dr. Ftaeml and he had gone out together and done the town after they got the kids safely married—and Mr. Kiku was feeling it somewhat, in a pleasant, relaxed manner. Even though his head buzzed and his coordination was poor, his stomach was not troubling him. He felt fine.

He was trying fuzzily to sum up the affair in his mind. All this fuss, all this grief, because some fool spaceman more than a century ago didn't have sense enough not to tamper with native life until protocol had been worked out. Oh my people, my people!

On second thought, he told himself not to point the finger of scorn; he might be looking in a mirror.

There was something that good old Ftaeml had said last night… something…now what was it he had said? Something which, at the time, convinced Kiku that the Hroshii never had had any weapons capable of seriously damaging Earth. Of course a Rargyllian would not lie, not professionally…but would one skate around the truth in order to conclude successfully a negotiation which seemed about to fail?

Well, since it had all been settled without violence he could only wonder. Just as well, perhaps.

Besides, the next heathens to show up might not be bluffing. That would not be good.

Mildred's voice came to him. "Mr. Kiku, the Randavian delegation is waiting."

"Tell them I'm molting!"

“Sir?”

“Never mind. Tell them I’ll be right in. East conference room.”

He sighed, decided to treat himself to just one pill, then got up and headed for the door, ready to stick his finger in another hole in the dike. Chinese obligation, be thought; once you take it on you can’t drop it.

But he still felt cheerful and sang a snatch of the only song he knew all the way through: “*…this story has no moral, this story has no end. This story only goes to show that there ain’t no good in men*.”

In the meantime, out at the space port, the new Secretary for Spatial Affairs was seeing off the noble Hroshii. Her Imperial Highness, the Infanta of that race, 213th of her line, heiress to the matriarchy of the Seven Suns, future ruler over nine billion of her own kind, and lately nicknamed “The Lummox” contentedly took her pair of pets aboard the imperial yacht.

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TUNNEL IN THE SKY

AUTHOR OF *STARSHIP TROOPERS*

ROBERT A. HEINLEIN

BIRTH OF A LOST NATION…

The young man was dressed only in walking shorts and soft bush shoes. "Friends," he said. "we are gathered here tonight to found a new nation."

He paused to let the Idea sink in. "You know our situation. We fervently hope to be rescued. I will even go so far as to say that I think we will be rescued…eventually.

"It might be tomorrow…it might be our descendants a thousand years from now. But when the main body of our great race reestablishes contact with us, it is up to us whether they find a civilized society, or flea-bitten animals without language, without art—with the light of reason grown dim. *Or no survivors at all, nothing but bones picked clean!"*

"Heinlein has produced another ingenious piece of scientific imagination."

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THE DOOR INTO SUMMER
DOUBLE STAR
FARMER IN THE SKY
FRIDAY
GRUMBLES FROM THE GRAVE
HAVE SPACE SUIT-WILL TRAVEL
JOB: A COMEDY OF JUSTICE
THE NUMBER OF THE BEAST
THE PUPPET MASTERS
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STARMAN JONES
TIME FOR THE STARS
TUNNEL IN THE SKY
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Tunnel
IN THE
Sky

Robert A. Heinlein

A Del Rey Book

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For **Jeannie** and **Bibs**

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The Marching Hordes

THE BULLETIN BOARD OUTSIDE LECTURE HALL 1712-A of Patrick Henry High School showed a flashing red light. Rod Walker pushed his way into a knot of students and tried to see what the special notice had to say. He received an elbow in the stomach, accompanied by: “Hey! Quit shoving!”

“Sorry. Take it easy, Jimmy.” Rod locked the elbow in a bone breaker but put no pressure on, craned his neck to look over Jimmy Throxton’s head. “What’s on the board?”

“No class today.”

“Why not?”

A voice near the board answered him. “Because tomorrow it’s ‘Hail, Caesar, we who are about to die—’”

“So?” Rod felt his stomach tighten as it always did before an examination. Someone moved aside and he managed to read the notice:

PATRICK HENRY HIGH SCHOOL
Department of Social Studies

SPECIAL NOTICE to all students Course 410 (elective senior seminar) Advanced Survival, instr. Dr. Matson, 1712-A MWF

1. There will be no class Friday the 14th.
2. *Twenty-Four Hour Notice* is hereby given of final examination in Solo Survival. Students will present themselves for physical check at 0900 Saturday in the dispensary of Templeton Gate and will start passing through the gate at 1000, using three-minute intervals by lot.
3. *TEST CONDITIONS:*

    a. ANY planet, ANY climate, ANY terrain;
    b. NO rules, ALL weapons, ANY equipment;
    c. TEAMING IS PERMITTED but teams will not be allowed to pass through the gate in company;
    d. TEST DURATION is not less than forty-eight hours, not more than ten days.

4. Dr. Matson will be available for advice and consultation until 1700 Friday.
5. Test may be postponed Only on recommendation of examining physician, but any student may withdraw from the course without administrative penalty up until 1000 Saturday.

6. Good luck and long life to you all!

(s) B. P. Matson, Sc.D.

Approved:

J. R. ROERICH, *for the Board*

Rod Walker reread the notice slowly, while trying to quiet the quiver in his nerves. He checked off the test conditions—why, those were not "conditions" but a total lack of conditions, no limits of any sort! They could dump you through the gate and the next instant you might be facing a polar bear at forty below—or wrestling an Octopus deep in warm salt water.

Or, he added, faced up to some three-headed horror on a planet you had never heard of.

He heard a soprano voice complaining, "'Twenty-four hour notice!' Why, it's less than twenty hours now. That's not fair."

Another girl answered, "What's the difference? I wish we were starting this minute. I won't get a wink of sleep tonight."

"If we are supposed to have twenty-four hours to get ready, then we ought to have them. Fair is fair."

Another student, a tall, husky Zulu girl, chuckled softly. "Go on in. Tell the Deacon that."

Rod backed out of the press, taking Jimmy Throxton with him. He felt that he knew what "Deacon" Matson would say…something about the irrelevancy of fairness to survival. He chewed over the bait in paragraph five; nobody would say boo if he dropped the course. After all, "Advanced Survival" was properly a college course; he would graduate without it.

But he knew down deep that if he lost his nerve now, he would never take the course later.

Jimmy said nervously, "What d'you think of it, Rod?"

"All right, I guess. But I'd like to know whether or not to wear my long-handled underwear. Do you suppose the Deacon would give us a hint?"

"Him? Not him! He thinks a broken leg is the height of humor. That man would eat his own grandmother—without salt."

"Oh, come now! He'd use salt. Say, Jim? You saw what it said about teaming."

"Yeah…what about it?" Jimmy's eyes shifted away.

Rod felt a moment's irritation. He was making a suggestion as delicate as a proposal of marriage, an offer to put his own life in the same basket with Jimmy's. The greatest risk in a solo test was that a fellow just had to sleep sometime…but a team could split it up and

stand watch over each other.

Jimmy must know that Rod was better than he was, with any weapon or bare hands; the proposition was to his advantage. Yet here he was hesitating as if he thought Rod might handicap him. “What’s the matter, Jim?” Rod said bleakly. “Figure you’re safer going it alone?”

“Uh, no, not exactly.”

“You mean you’d rather not team with *me*?”

“No, no, I didn’t mean that!”

“Then what did you mean?”

“I meant—Look, Rod, I surely do thank you. I won’t forget it. But that notice said something else, too.”

“What?”

“I said we could dump this durned course and still graduate. And I just happened to remember that I don’t need it for the retail clothing business.”

“Huh? I thought you had ambitions to become a wide-angled lawyer?”

“So exotic jurisprudence loses its brightest jewel…so what do I care? It will make my old man very happy to learn that I’ve decided to stick with the family business.”

“You mean you’re scared.”

“Well, that’s one way of putting it. Aren’t you?”

Rod took a deep breath. “Yes. I’m scared.”

“Good! Now let’s both give a classic demonstration of how to survive and stay alive by marching down to the Registrar’s office and bravely signing our names to withdrawal slips.”

“Uh, no. You go ahead.”

“You mean you’re sticking?”

“I guess so.”

“Look, Rod, have you looked over the statistics on last year’s classes?”

“No. And I don’t want to. So long.” Rod turned sharply and headed for the classroom door, leaving Jimmy to stare after him with a troubled look.

The lecture room was occupied by a dozen or so of the seminar’s students. Doctor Matson, the “Deacon,” was squatting tailor-fashion on one corner of his desk and holding forth informally. He was a small man and spare, with a leathery face, a patch over one eye, and most of three fingers missing from his left hand. On his chest were miniature ribbons, marking service in three famous first expeditions; one carried a tiny diamond cluster that showed him to be the last living member of

that group.

Rod slipped into the second row. The Deacon's eye flicked at him as he went on talking. "I don't understand the complaints," he said jovially. "The test conditions say 'all weapons' so you can protect yourself any way you like…from a slingshot to a cobalt bomb. I think final examination should be bare hands, not so much as a nail file. But the Board of Education doesn't agree, so we do it this sissy way instead." He shrugged and grinned.

"Uh, Doctor, I take it then that the Board knows that we are going to run into dangerous animals?"

"Eh? You surely will! The most dangerous animal known."

"Doctor, if you mean that literally—"

"Oh, I do, I do!"

"Then I take it that we are either being sent to Mithra and will have to watch out for snow apes, or we are going to stay on Terra and be dumped where we can expect leopards. Am I right?"

The Deacon shook his head despairingly. "My boy, you had better cancel and take this course over. Those dumb brutes aren't dangerous."

"But Jasper says, in *Predators and Prey*, that the two trickiest, most dangerous—"

"Jasper's maiden aunt! I'm talking about the real King of the Beasts, the only animal that is always dangerous, even when not hungry. The two-legged brute. Take a look around you!"

The instructor leaned forward. "I've said this nineteen dozen times but you still don't believe it. Man is the one animal that can't be tamed. He goes along for years as peaceful as a cow, when it suits him. Then when it suits him not to be, he makes a leopard look like a tabby cat. Which goes double for the female of the species. Take another look around you. All friends. We've been on group-survival field tests together; we can depend on each other. So? Read about the Donner Party, or the First Venus Expedition. Anyhow, the test area will have several other classes in it, all strangers to you." Doctor Matson fixed his eye on Rod. "I hate to see some of you take this test, I really do. Some of you are city dwellers by nature; I'm afraid I have not managed to get it through your heads that there are no policemen where you are going. Nor will I be around to give you a hand if you make some silly mistake."

His eye moved on; Rod wondered if the Deacon meant him. Sometimes he felt that the Deacon took delight in rawhiding him. But Rod knew that it was serious; the course was required for all the Outlands professions for the good reason that the Outlands were places where you were smart—or you were dead. Rod had chosen to take this course before entering college because he hoped that it would help him to get a scholarship—but that did not mean that he thought it was just a

formality.

He looked around, wondering who would be willing to team with him now that Jimmy had dropped out. There was a couple in front of him, Bob Baxter and Carmen Garcia. He checked them off, as they undoubtedly would team together; they planned to become medical missionaries and intended to marry as soon as they could.

How about Johann Braun? He would make a real partner, all right—strong, fast on his feet, and smart. But Rod did not trust him, nor did he think that Braun would want him. He began to see that he might have made a mistake in not cultivating other friends in the class besides Jimmy.

That big Zulu girl, Caroline something-unpronounceable. Strong as an ox and absolutely fearless. But it would not do to team with a girl; girls were likely to mistake a cold business deal for a romantic gambit. His eyes moved on until at last he was forced to conclude that there was no one there to whom he wished to suggest partnership.

"Prof, how about a hint? Should we take suntan oil? Or chilblain lotion?"

Matson grinned and drawled, "Son, I'll tell you every bit that I know. This test area was picked by a teacher in Europe…and I picked one for his class. But I don't know what it is any more than you do. Send me a post card."

"But—" The boy who had spoken stopped. Then he suddenly stood up. "Prof, this isn't a fair test. I'm checking out."

"What's unfair about it? Not that we meant to make it fair."

"Well, you could dump us any place—"

"That's right."

"—the back side of the Moon, in vacuum up to our chins. Or onto a chlorine planet. Or the middle of an ocean. I don't know whether to take a space suit, or a canoe. So the deuce with it. Real life isn't like that."

"It isn't, eh?" Matson said softly. "That's what Jonah said when the whale swallowed him." He added, "But I will give you some hints. We mean this test to be passed by anyone bright enough to deserve it. So we won't let you walk into a poisonous atmosphere, or a vacuum, without a mask. If you are dumped into water, land won't be too far to swim. And so on. While I don't know where you are going, I did see the list of test areas for this year's classes. A smart man can survive in any of them. You ought to realize, son, that the Board of Education would have nothing to gain by killing off all its candidates for the key professions."

The student sat down again as suddenly as he had stood up. The instructor said, "Change your mind again?"

“Uh, yes, sir. If it’s a fair test, I’ll take it.”

Matson shook his head. “You’ve already flunked it. You’re excused. Don’t bother the Registrar; I’ll notify him.”

The boy started to protest; Matson inclined his head toward the door. “Out!” There was an embarrassed silence while he left the room, then Matson said briskly, “This is a class in applied philosophy and I am sole judge of who is ready and who is not. Anybody who thinks of the world in terms of what it ‘ought’ to be, rather than what it is, isn’t ready for final examination. You’ve got to relax and roll with the punch…not get yourself all worn out with adrenalin exhaustion at the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune. Any more questions?”

There were a few more but it became evident that Matson either truthfully did not know the nature of the test area, or was guarding the knowledge; his answers gained them nothing. He refused to advise as to weapons, saying simply that the school armorer would be at the gate ready to issue all usual weapons, while any unusual ones were up to the individual. “Remember, though, your best weapon is between your ears and under your scalp—provided it’s loaded.”

The group started to drift away; Rod got up to leave. Matson caught his eye and said, “Walker, are you planning to take the test?”

“Why, yes, of course, sir.”

“Come here a moment.” He led him into his office, closed the door and sat down. He looked up at Rod, fiddled with a paperweight on his desk and said slowly, “Rod, you’re a good boy…but sometimes that isn’t enough.”

Rod said nothing.

“Tell me,” Matson continued, “why you want to take this test?”

“Sir?”

“‘Sir’ yourself,” Matson answered grumpily. “Answer my question.”

Rod stared, knowing that he had gone over this with Matson before he was accepted for the course. But he explained again his ambition to study for an Outlands profession. “So I have to qualify in survival. I couldn’t even get a degree in colonial administration without it, much less any of the planetography or planetology specialties.”

“Want to be an explorer, huh?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Like me.”

“Yes, Sir. Like you.”

“Hmm…would you believe me if I told you that it was the worst mistake I ever made?”

“Huh? No, sir!”

“I didn’t think you would. Son, the cutest trick of all is how to know *then* what you know *now*. No way to, of course. But I’m telling you straight: I think you’ve been born into the wrong age.”

“Sir?”

“I think you are a romantic. Now this is a very romantic age, so there is no room in it for romantics; it calls for practical men. A hundred years ago you would have made a banker or lawyer or professor and you could have worked out your romanticism by reading fanciful tales and dreaming about what you might have been if you hadn’t had the misfortune to be born into a humdrum period. But this happens to be a period when adventure and romance are a part of daily existence. Naturally it takes very practical people to cope with it.”

Rod was beginning to get annoyed. “What’s the matter with *me?*”

“Nothing. I like you. I don’t want to see you get hurt. But you are ’way too emotional, too sentimental to be a real survivor type.”

Matson pushed a hand toward him. “Now keep your shirt on. I know you can make fire by rubbing a couple of dry words together. I’m well aware that you won merit badges in practically everything. I’m sure you can devise a water filter with your bare hands and know which side of the tree the moss grows on. But I’m not sure that you can beware of the Truce of the Bear.”

“‘The Truce of the Bear?’”

“Never mind. Son, I think you ought to cancel this course. If you must, you can repeat it in college.”

Rod looked stubborn. Matson sighed. “I could drop you. Perhaps I should.”

“But *why*, sir?”

“That’s the point. I couldn’t give a reason. On the record, you’re as promising a student as I have ever had.” He stood up and put out his hand. “Good luck. And remember—when it gets down to fundamentals, do what you have to do and shed no tears.”

Rod should have gone straight home. His family lived in an out-county of Greater New York City, located on the Grand Canyon plateau through Hoboken Gate. But his commuting route required him to change at Emigrants’ Gap and he found himself unable to resist stopping to rubberneck.

When he stepped out of the tube from school he should have turned right, taken the rotary lift to the level above, and stepped through to Arizona Strip. But he was thinking about supplies, equipment, and weapons for tomorrow’s examination; his steps automatically bore left, he got on the slideway leading to the great hall of the planetary gates.

He told himself that he would watch for only ten minutes; he would not be late for dinner. He picked his way through the crowd and entered

the great hall—not Onto the emigration floor itself, but onto the spectator's balcony facing the gates. This was the new gate house he was in, the one opened for traffic in '68; the original Emigrants' Gap, now used for Terran traffic and trade with Luna, stood on the Jersey Flats a few kilometers east alongside the pile that powered it.

The balcony faced the six gates. It could seat eighty-six hundred people but was half filled and crowded only in the center. It was here, of course, that Rod wished to sit so that he might see through all six gates. He wormed his way down the middle aisle, squatted by the railing, then spotted someone leaving a front row seat. Rod grabbed it, earning a dirty look from a man who had started for it from the other aisle.

Rod fed coins into the arm of the seat; it opened out, he sat down and looked around. He was opposite the replica Statue of Liberty, twin to the one that had stood for a century where now was Bedloe Crater. Her torch reached to the distant ceiling; on both her right and her left three great gates let emigrants into the outer worlds.

Rod did not glance at the statue; he looked at the gates. It was late afternoon and heavily overcast at east coast North America, but gate one was open to some planetary spot having glaring noonday sun; Rod could catch glimpses through it of men dressed in shorts and sun hats and nothing else. Gate number two had a pressure lock rigged over it; it carried a big skull & crossbones sign and the symbol for chlorine. A red light burned over it. While he watched, the red light flickered out and a blue light replaced it; the door slowly opened and a traveling capsule for a chlorine-breather crawled out. Waiting to meet it were eight humans in diplomatic full dress. One carried a gold baton.

Rod considered spending another half pluton to find out who the important visitor was, but his attention was diverted to An auxiliary gate had been set up on the floor, facing gate five and almost under the balcony. Two high steel fences joined the two gates, forming with them an alley as wide as the gates and as long as the space between, about fifteen meters by seventy-five. This pen was packed with humanity moving from the temporary gate toward and through gate five—and onto some planet light-years away. They poured out of nowhere, for the floor back of the auxiliary gate was bare, hurried like cattle between the two fences, spilled through gate five and were gone. A squad of brawny Mongol policemen, each armed with a staff as tall as himself, was spread out along each fence. They were using their staves to hurry the emigrants and they were not being gentle. Almost underneath Rod one of them prodded an old coolie so hard that he stumbled and fell. The man had been carrying his belongings, his equipment for a new world, in two bundles supported from a pole balanced on his right shoulder.

The old coolie fell to his skinny knees, tried to get up, fell flat. Rod thought sure he would be trampled, but somehow he was on his feet again—minus his baggage. He tried to hold his place in the torrent and

recover his possessions, but the guard prodded him again and he was forced to move on barehanded. Rod lost sight of him before he had moved five meters.

There were local police outside the fence but they did not interfere. This narrow stretch between the two gates was, for the time, extraterritorial; the local police had no jurisdiction. But one of them did seem annoyed at the brutality shown the old man; he put his face to the steel mesh and called out something in lingua terra. The Mongol cop answered savagely in the same simple language, telling the North American what he could do about it, then went back to shoving and shouting and prodding still more briskly.

The crowd streaming through the pen were Asiatics—Japanese, Indonesians, Siamese, some East Indians, a few Eurasians, but predominantly South Chinese. To Rod they all looked much alike—tiny women with babies on hip or back, or often one on back and one in arms, endless runny-nosed and shaven-headed children, fathers with household goods ill enormous back packs or pushed ahead on barrows. There were a few dispirited ponies dragging two-wheeled carts much too big for them but most of the torrent had only that which they could carry.

Rod had heard an old story which asserted that if all the Chinese on Terra were marched four abreast past a given point the column would never pass that point, as more Chinese would be born fast enough to replace those who had marched past. Rod had taken his slide rule and applied arithmetic to check it—to find, of course, that the story was nonsense; even if one ignored deaths, while counting all births, the last Chinese would pass the reviewing stand in less than four years. Nevertheless, while watching this mob being herded like brutes into a slaughterhouse, Rod felt that the old canard was true even though its mathematics was faulty. There seemed to be no end to them.

He decided to risk that half pluton to find out what was going on. He slid the coin into a slot in the chair's speaker; the voice of the commentator reached his ears: "—the visiting minister. The prince royal was met by officials of the Terran Corporation including the Director General himself and now is being escorted to the locks of the Ratoonian enclave. After the television reception tonight staff level conversations will start. A spokesman close to the Director General has pointed out that, in view of the impossibility of conflict of interest between oxygen types such as ourselves and the Ratoonians, any outcome of the conference must be to our advantage, the question being to what extent.

"If you will turn your attention again to gate five, we will repeat what we said earlier: gate five is on forty-eight hour loan to the Australasian Republic. The temporary gate you see erected below is hyperfolded to a point in central Australia in the Arunta Desert, where this emigration has been mounting in a great encampment for the past

several weeks. His Serene Majesty Chairman Fung Chee Mu of the Australasian Republic has informed the Corporation that his government intends to move in excess of two million people in forty-eight hours, a truly impressive figure, more than forty thousand each hour. The target figure for this year for all planetary emigration gates taken together—Emigrants' Gap, Peter the Great, and Witwatersrand Gates—is only seventy million emigrants or an average of eight thousand per hour. This movement proposes a rate five times as great using only *one* gate!"

The commentator continued: "Yet when we watch the speed, efficiency and the, uh—*forthrightness* with which they are carrying out this evolution it seems likely that they will achieve their goal. Our own figures show them to be slightly ahead of quota for the first nine hours. During those same nine hours there have been one hundred seven births and eighty-two deaths among the emigrants, the high death rate, of course, being incident to the temporary hazards of the emigration.

"The planet of destination, GO-8703-IV, to be called henceforth 'Heavenly Mountains' according to Chairman Fung, is classed as a bounty planet and no attempt had been made to colonize it. The Corporation has been assured that the colonists are volunteers." It seemed to Rod that the announcer's tone was ironical. "This is understandable when one considers the phenomenal population pressure of the Australasian Republic. A brief historical rundown may be in order. After the removal of the remnants of the former Australian population to New Zealand, pursuant to the Peiping Peace Treaty, the first amazing effort of the new government was the creation of the great inland sea of—"

Rod muted the speaker and looked back at the floor below. He did not care to hear school-book figures on how the Australian Desert had been made to blossom like the rose…and nevertheless had been converted into a slum with more people in it than all of North America. Something new was happening at gate four—

Gate four had been occupied by a moving cargo belt when he had come in; now the belt had crawled away and lost itself in the bowels of the terminal and an emigration party was lining up to go through.

This was no poverty-stricken band of refugees chivvied along by police; here each family had its own wagon…long, sweeping, boat-tight Conestogas drawn by three-pair teams and housed in sturdy glass canvas…square and businesslike Studebakers with steel bodies, high mudcutter wheels, and pulled by one or two-pair teams. The draft animals were Morgans and lordly Clydesdales and jug-headed Missouri mules with strong shoulders and shrewd, suspicious eyes. Dogs trotted between wheels, wagons were piled high with household goods and implements and children, poultry protested the indignities of fate in cages tied on behind, and a little Shetland pony, riderless but carrying his saddle and just a bit too tall to run underneath with the dogs, stayed

close to the tailgate of one family's rig.

Rod wondered at the absence of cattle and stepped up the speaker again. But the announcer was still droning about the fertility of Australasians; he muted it again and watched. Wagons had moved onto the floor and taken up tight echelon position close to the gate, ready to move, with the tail of the train somewhere out of sight below. The gate was not yet ready and drivers were getting down and gathering at the Salvation Army booth under the skirts of the Goddess of Liberty, for a cup of coffee and some banter. It occurred to Rod that there probably was no coffee where they were going and might not be for years, since Terra never exported food—on the contrary, food and fissionable metals were almost the only permissible imports; until an Outland colony produced a surplus of one or the other it could expect precious little help from Terra.

It was extremely expensive in terms of uranium to keep an interstellar gate open and the people in this wagon train could expect to be out of commercial touch with Earth until such a time as they had developed surpluses valuable enough in trade to warrant reopening the gate at regular intervals. Until that time they were on their own and must make do with what they could take with them…which made horses more practical than helicopters, picks and shovels more useful than bulldozers. Machinery gets out of order and requires a complex technology to keep it going—but good old "hayburners" keep right on breeding, cropping grass, and pulling loads.

Deacon Matson had told the survival class that the real hardships of primitive Outlands were not the lack of plumbing, heating, power, light, nor weather conditioning, but the shortage of simple things like coffee and tobacco.

Rod did not smoke and coffee he could take or let alone; he could not imagine getting fretful over its absence. He scrunched down in his seat, trying to see through the gate to guess the cause of the hold up. He could not see well, as the arching canvas of a prairie schooner blocked his view, but it did seem that the gate operator had a phase error; it looked as if the sky was where the ground ought to be. The extradimensional distortions necessary to match places on two planets many light-years apart were not simply a matter of expenditure of enormous quantities of energy; they were precision problems fussy beyond belief, involving high mathematics and high art—the math was done by machine but the gate operator always had to adjust the last couple of decimal places by prayer and intuition.

In addition to the dozen-odd proper motions of each of the planets involved, motions which could usually be added and canceled out, there was also the rotation of each planet. The problem was to make the last hyperfold so that the two planets were internally tangent at the points selected as gates, with their axes parallel and their rotations in the *same* direction. Theoretically it was possible to match two points in contra-

rotation, twisting the insubstantial fabric of space-time in exact step with “real” motions; practically such a solution was not only terribly wasteful of energy but almost unworkable—the ground surface beyond the gate tended to skid away like a slidewalk and tilt at odd angles.

Rod did not have the mathematics to appreciate the difficulties. Being only about to finish high school his training had gone no farther than tensor calculus, statistical mechanics, simple transfinities, generalized geometries of six dimensions, and, on the practical side, analysis for electronics, primary cybernetics and robotics, and basic design of analog computers; he had had no advanced mathematics as yet. He was not aware of his ignorance and simply concluded that the gate operator must be thumb-fingered. He looked back at the emigrant party.

The drivers were still gathered at the booth, drinking coffee and munching doughnuts. Most of the men were growing beards; Rod concluded from the beavers that the party had been training for several months. The captain of the party sported a little goatee, mustaches, and rather long hair, but it seemed to Rod that he could not be many years older than Rod himself. He was a professional, of course, required to hold a degree in Outlands arts—hunting, scouting, jackleg mechanics, gunsmithing, farming, first aid, group psychology, survival group tactics, law, and a dozen other things the race has found indispensable when stripped for action.

This captain’s mount was a Palomino mare, lovely as a sunrise, and the captain was dressed as a California don of an earlier century—possibly as a compliment to his horse. A warning light flashed at the gate’s annunciator panel and he swung into saddle, still eating a doughnut, and cantered down the wagons for a final inspection, riding toward Rod. His back was straight, his seat deep and easy, his bearing confident. Carried low on a fancy belt he wore two razor guns, each in a silver-chased holster that matched the ornate silver of his bridle and saddle.

Rod held his breath until the captain passed out of sight under the balcony, then sighed and considered studying to be like him, rather than for one of the more intellectual Outlands professions. He did not know just what he did want to be…except that he meant to get off Earth as soon as he possibly could and get out there where things were going on!

Which reminded him that the first hurdle was tomorrow; in a few days he would either be eligible to matriculate for whatever it was he decided on, or he would be—but no use worrying about *that*. He remembered uneasily that it was getting late and he had not even decided on equipment, nor picked his weapons. This party captain carried razor guns; should he carry one? No, this party would fight as a unit, if it had to fight. Its leader carried that type of weapon to enforce his authority—not for solo survival. Well, what should he take?

A siren sounded and the drivers returned to their wagons. The captain came back at a brisk trot. “Reins up!” he called out. “Reeeeeeiiiins UP!” He took station by the gate, facing the head of the train; the mare stood quivering and tending to dance.

The Salvation Army lassie came out from behind her counter carrying a baby girl. She called to the party captain but her voice did not carry to the balcony.

The captain’s voice did carry. “Number four! Doyle! Come get your child!” A red-headed man with a spade beard climbed down from the fourth wagon and sheepishly reclaimed the youngster to a chorus of cheers and cat calls. He passed the baby up to his wife, who upped its skirt and commenced paddling its bottom. Doyle climbed to his seat and took his reins.

“Call off!” the captain sang out.

“One.”

“Tuh!”

“Three!”

“Fo*ah*!”

“*Five*!”

The count passed under the balcony, passed down the chute out of hearing. In a few moments it came back, running down this time, ending with a shouted “*ONE*!” The captain held up his right arm and watched the lights of the order panel.

A light turned green. He brought his arm down smartly with a shout of “Roll ’em! *Ho!*” The Palomino took off like a race horse, cut under the nose of the nigh lead horse of the first team, and shot through the gate.

Whips cracked. Rod could hear shouts of “Git, Molly! Git, Ned!” and “No, no, you jugheads!” The train began to roll. By the time the last one on the floor was through the gate and the much larger number which had been in the chute below had begun to show it was rolling at a gallop, with the drivers bracing their feet wide and their wives riding the brakes. Rod tried to count them, made it possibly sixty-three wagons as the last one rumbled through the gate…and was gone, already half a galaxy away.

He sighed and sat back with a warm feeling sharpened with undefined sorrow. Then he stepped up the speaker volume: “—onto New Canaan, the premium planet described by the great Langford as ‘The rose without thorns.’ These colonists have paid a premium of sixteen thousand four hundred per person—not counting exempt or co-opted members—for the privilege of seeking their fortunes and protecting their posterity by moving to New Canaan. The machines predict that the premium will increase for another twenty-eight years; therefore, if you are considering giving your children the priceless boon

of citizenship on New Canaan, the time to act is now. For a beautiful projection reel showing this planet send one pluton to 'Information, Box One, Emigrants' Gap, New Jersey County, Greater New York.' For a complete descriptive listing of all planets now open plus a special list of those to be opened in the near future add another half pluton. Those seeing this broadcast in person may obtain these items at the information booth in the foyer outside the great hall."

Rod did not listen. He had long since sent for every free item and most of the non-free ones issued by the Commission for Emigration and Trade. Just now he was wondering why the gate to New Canaan had not relaxed.

He found out at once. Stock barricades rose up out of the floor, forming a fenced passage from gate four to the chute under him. Then a herd of cattle filled the gate and came flooding toward him, bawling and snorting. They were prime Hereford steers, destined to become tender steaks and delicious roasts for a rich but slightly hungry Earth. After them and among them rode New Canaan cowpunchers armed with long goads with which they urged the beasts to greater speed—the undesirability of running weight off the animals was offset by the extreme cost of keeping the gate open, a cost which had to be charged against the cattle.

Rod discovered that the speaker had shut itself off; the half hour he had paid for was finished. He sat up with sudden guilt, realizing that he would have to hurry or he would be late for supper. He rushed out, stepping on feet and mumbling apologies, and caught the slide-way to Hoboken Gate.

This gate, being merely for Terra-surface commuting, was permanently dilated and required no operator, since the two points brought into coincidence were joined by a rigid frame, the solid Earth. Rod showed his commuter's ticket to the electronic monitor and stepped through to Arizona, in company with a crowd of neighbors.

"The (almost) solid Earth—" The gate robot took into account tidal distortions but could not anticipate minor seismic variables. As Rod stepped through he felt his feet quiver as if to a small earthquake, then the *terra* was again *firma*. But he was still in an airlock at sea-level pressure. The radiation from massed bodies triggered the mechanism, the lock closed and air pressure dropped. Rod yawned heavily to adjust to the pressure of Grand Canyon plateau, North Rim, less than three quarters that of New Jersey. But despite the fact that he made the change twice a day he found himself rubbing his right ear to get rid of an ear ache.

The lock opened, he stepped out. Having come two thousand miles in a split second he now had ten minutes by slide tube and a fifteen minute walk to get home. He decided to dogtrot and be on time after all. He might have made it if there had not been several thousand other people trying to use the same facilities.

2

The Fifth Way

ROCKET SHIPS DID NOT CONQUER SPACE; THEY MERELY challenged it. A rocket leaving Earth at seven miles per second is terribly slow for the vast reaches beyond. Only the Moon is reasonably near—four days, more or less. Mars is thirty-seven weeks away, Saturn a dreary six years, Pluto an impossible half century, by the elliptical orbits possible to rockets.

Ortega's torch ships brought the Solar System within reach. Based on mass conversion, Einstein's deathless $e = Mc^2$, they could boost for the entire trip at any acceleration the pilot could stand. At an easy one gravity the inner planets were only hours from Earth, far Pluto only eighteen days. It was a change like that from horseback to jet plane.

The shortcoming of this brave new toy was that there was not much anywhere to go. The Solar system, from a human standpoint, is made up of remarkably unattractive real estate—save for lovely Terra herself, lush and green and beautiful. The steel-limbed Jovians enjoy gravity 2.5 times ours and their poisonous air at inhuman pressure keeps them in health. Martians prosper in near vacuum, the rock lizards of Luna do not breathe at all. But these planets are not for men.

Men prosper on an oxygen planet close enough to a G-type star for the weather to cycle around the freezing point of water…that is to say, on Earth.

When you are already there why go anywhere? The reason was babies, too many babies. Malthus pointed it out long ago; food increases by arithmetical progression, people increase by geometrical progression. By World War I half the world lived on the edge of starvation; by World War II Earth's population was increasing by 55,000 people *every day*; before World War III, as early as 1954, the increase had jumped to 100,000 mouths and stomachs per day, 35,000,000 additional people each year…and the population of Terra had climbed well beyond that which its farm lands could support.

The hydrogen, germ, and nerve gas horrors that followed were not truly political. The true meaning was more that of beggars fighting over a crust of bread.

The author of *Gulliver's Travels* sardonically proposed that Irish babies be fattened for English tables; other students urged less drastic ways of curbing population—none of which made the slightest difference. Life, *all* life, has the twin drives to survive and to reproduce. Intelligence is an aimless byproduct except as it serves these basic

drives.

But intelligence *can* made to serve the mindless demands of life. Our Galaxy contains in excess of one hundred thousand Earth-type planets, each as warm and motherly to men as sweet Terra. Ortega's torch ships could reach the stars. Mankind could colonize, even as the hungry millions of Europe had crossed the Atlantic and raised more babies in the New World.

Some did…hundreds of thousands. But the entire race, working as a team, cannot build and launch a hundred ships a day, each fit for a thousand colonists, and keep it up day after day, year after year, time without end. Even with the hands and the will (which the race never had) there is not that much steel, aluminum, and uranium in Earth's crust. There is not one hundredth of the necessary amount.

But intelligence can find solutions where there are none. Psychologists once locked an ape in a room, for which they had arranged only four ways of escaping. Then they spied on him to see which of the four he would find.

The ape escaped a fifth way.

Dr. Jesse Evelyn Ramsbotham had not been trying to solve the baby problem; he had been trying to build a time machine. He had two reasons: first, because time machines are an impossibility; second, because his hands would sweat and he would stammer whenever in the presence of a nubile female. He was not aware that the first reason was compensation for the second, in fact he was not aware of the second reason—it was a subject his conscious mind avoided.

It is useless to speculate as to the course of history had Jesse Evelyn Ramsbotham's parents had the good sense to name their son Bill instead of loading him with two girlish names. He might have become an All-American halfback and ended up selling bonds and adding his quota of babies to a sum already disastrous. Instead he became a mathematical physicist.

Progress in physics is achieved by denying the obvious and accepting the impossible. Any nineteenth century physicist could have given unassailable reasons why atom bombs were impossible if his reason were not affronted at the question; any twentieth century physicist could explain why time travel was incompatible with the real world of space-time. But Ramsbotham began fiddling with the three greatest Einsteinian equations, the two relativity equations for distance and duration and the mass-conversion equation; each contained the velocity of light. "Velocity" is first derivative, the differential of distance with respect to time; he converted those equations into differential equations, then played games with them. He would feed the results to the Rakitiac computer, remote successor to Univac, Eniac and Maniac. While he was doing these things his hands never sweated nor did he stammer, except when he was forced to deal with the young lady

who was chief programmer for the giant computer.

His first model produced a time-stasis or low-entropy field no bigger than a football—but a lighted cigarette placed inside with full power setting was still burning a week later. Ramsbotham picked up the cigarette, resumed smoking and thought about it.

Next he tried a day-old chick, with colleagues to witness. Three months later the chick was unaged and no hungrier than chicks usually are. He reversed the phase relation and cut in power for the shortest time he could manage with his bread-boarded hook-up.

In less than a second the newly-hatched chick was long dead, starved and decayed.

He was aware that he had simply changed the slope of a curve, but he was convinced that he was on the track of true time travel. He never did find it, although once he thought that he had—he repeated by request his demonstration with a chick for some of his colleagues; that night two of them picked the lock on his lab, let the little thing out and replaced it with an egg. Ramsbotham might have been permanently convinced that he had found time travel and then spent the rest of his life in a blind alley had they not cracked the egg and showed him that it was hard-boiled.

But he did not give up. He made a larger model and tried to arrange a dilation, or anomaly (he did not call it a “Gate”) which would let him get in and out of the field himself.

When he threw on power, the space between the curving magnetodes of his rig no longer showed the wall beyond, but a steaming jungle. He jumped to the conclusion that this must be a forest of the Carboniferous Period. It had often occurred to him that the difference between space and time might simply be human prejudice, but this was not one of the times; he believed what he wanted to believe.

He hurriedly got a pistol and with much bravery and no sense crawled between the magnetodes.

Ten minutes later he was arrested for waving firearms around in Rio de Janeiro’s civic botanical gardens. A lack of the Portuguese language increased both his difficulties and the length of time he spent in a tropical pokey, but three days later through the help of the North American consul he was on his way home. He thought and filled notebooks with equations and question marks on the whole trip.

The short cut to the stars had been found.

Ramsbotham’s discoveries eliminated the basic cause of war and solved the problem of what to do with all those dimpled babies. A hundred thousand planets were no farther away than the other side of the street. Virgin continents, raw wildernesses, fecund jungles, killing deserts, frozen tundras, and implacable mountains lay just beyond the

city gates, and the human race was again going out where the street lights do not shine, out where there was no friendly cop on the corner nor indeed a corner, out where there were no well-hung, tender steaks, no boneless hams, no packaged, processed foods suitable for delicate minds and pampered bodies. The biped omnivore again had need of his biting, tearing, animal teeth, for the race was spilling out (as it had so often before) to kill or be killed, eat or be eaten.

But the human race's one great talent is survival. The race, as always, adjusted to conditions, and the most urbanized, mechanized, and civilized, most upholstered and luxurious culture in all history trained its best children, its potential leaders, in primitive pioneer survival—man naked against nature.

Rod Walker knew about Dr. J. E. Ramsbotham, just as he knew about Einstein, Newton, and Columbus, but he thought about Ramsbotham no oftener than he thought about Columbus. These were figures in books, each larger than life and stuffed with straw, not real. He used the Ramsbotham Gate between Jersey and the Arizona Strip without thinking of its inventor the same way his ancestors used elevators without thinking of the name "Otis." If he thought about the miracle at all, it was a half-formed irritation that the Arizona side of Hoboken Gate was so far from his parents' home. It was known as Kaibab Gate on this side and was seven miles north of the Walker residence.

At the time the house had been built the location was at the extreme limit of tube delivery and other city utilities. Being an old house, its living room was above ground, with only bedrooms, pantry, and bombproof buried. The living room had formerly stuck nakedly above ground, an ellipsoid monocoque shell, but, as Greater New York spread, the neighborhood had been zoned for underground apartments and construction above ground which would interfere with semblance of virgin forest had been forbidden.

The Walkers had gone along to the extent of covering the living room with soil and planting it with casual native foliage, but they had refused to cover up their view window. It was the chief charm of the house, as it looked out at the great canyon. The community corporation had tried to coerce them into covering it up and had offered to replace it with a simulacrum window such as the underground apartments used, with a relayed view of the canyon. But Rod's father was a stubborn man and maintained that with weather, women, and wine there was nothing "just as good." His window was still intact.

Rod found the family sitting in front of the window, watching a storm work its way up the canyon—his mother, his father, and, to his great surprise, his sister. Helen was ten years older than he and an assault captain in the Amazons; she was seldom home.

The warmth of his greeting was not influenced by his realization

that her arrival would probably cause his own lateness to pass with little comment. “Sis! Hey, this is *swell*—I thought you were on Thule.”

“I was…until a few hours ago.” Rod tried to shake hands; his sister gathered him in a bear hug and bussed him on the mouth, squeezing him against the raised ornaments of her chrome corselet. She was still in uniform, a fact that caused him to think that she had just arrived—on her rare visits home she usually went slopping around in an old bathrobe and go-ahead slippers, her hair caught up in a knot. Now she was still in dress armor and kilt and had dumped her side arms, gauntlets, and plumed helmet on the floor.

She looked him over proudly. “My, but you’ve grown! You’re almost as tall as I am.”

“I’m taller.”

“Want to bet? No, don’t try to wiggle away from me; I’ll twist your arm. Slip off your shoes and stand back to back.”

“Sit down, children,” their father said mildly. “Rod, why were you late?”

“Uh…” He had worked out a diversion involving telling about the examination coming up, but he did not use it as his sister intervened.

“Don’t heckle him, Pater. Ask for excuses and you’ll get them. I learned that when I was a sublieutenant.”

“Quiet, daughter. I can raise him without your help.”

Rod was surprised by his father’s edgy answer, was more surprised by Helen’s answer: “So? Really?” Her tone was odd.

Rod saw his mother raise a hand, seem about to speak, then close her mouth. She looked upset. His sister and father looked at each other; neither spoke. Rod looked from one to the other, said slowly, “Say, what’s all this?”

His father glanced at him. “Nothing. We’ll say no more about it. Dinner is waiting. Coming, dear?” He turned to his wife, handed her up from her chair, offered her his arm.

“Just a minute,” Rod said insistently. “I was late because I was hanging around the Gap.”

“Very well. You know better, but I said we would say no more about it.” He turned toward the lift.

“But I wanted to tell you something else, Dad. I won’t be home for the next week or so.”

“Very well—*eh?* What did you say?”

“I’ll be away for a while, sir. Maybe ten days or a bit longer.”

His father looked perplexed, then shook his head. “Whatever your plans are, you will have to change them. I can’t let you go away at this time.”

"But, Dad—"

"I'm sorry, but that is definite."

"But, Dad, I *have* to!"

"No."

Rod looked frustrated. His sister said suddenly, "Pater, wouldn't it be well to find out why he wants to be away?"

"Now, daughter—"

"Dad, I'm taking my solo survival, starting tomorrow morning!"

Mrs. Walker gasped, then began to weep. Her husband said, "There, there, my dear!" then turned to his son and said harshly, "You've upset your mother."

"But, Dad, I…" Rod shut up, thinking bitterly that no one seemed to give a hoot about *his* end of it. After all, *he* was the one who was going to have to sink or swim. A lot they knew or—

"You see, Pater," his sister was saying. "He does have to be away. He has no choice, because—"

"I see nothing of the sort! Rod, I meant to speak about this earlier, but I had not realized that your test would take place so soon. When I signed permission for you to take that course, I had, I must admit, a mental reservation. I felt that the experience would be valuable later… when and if you took the course in college. But I never intended to let you come up against the final test while still in high school. You are too young."

Rod was shocked speechless. But his sister again spoke for him. "Fiddlesticks!"

"Eh? Now, daughter, please remember that—"

"Repeat fiddlesticks! Any girl in my company has been up against things as rough and many of them are not much older than Buddy. What are you trying to do, Pater? Break his nerve?"

"You have no reason to… I think we had best discuss this later."

"I think that is a good idea." Captain Walker took her brother's arm and they followed their parents down to the refectory. Dinner was on the table, still warm in its delivery containers; they took their places, standing, and Mr. Walker solemnly lighted the Peace Lamp. The family was evangelical Monist by inheritance, each of Rod's grandfathers having been converted in the second great wave of proselyting that swept out of Persia in the last decade of the previous century, and Rod's father took seriously his duties as family priest.

As the ritual proceeded Rod made his responses automatically, his mind on this new problem. His sister chimed in heartily but his mother's answers could hardly be heard.

Nevertheless the warm symbolism had its effect; Rod felt himself

calming down. By the time his father intoned the last "—one Principle, one family, one flesh!" he felt like eating. He sat down and took the cover off his plate.

A yeast cutlet, molded to look like a chop and stripped with real bacon, a big baked potato, and a grilled green lobia garnished with baby's buttons… Rod's mouth watered as he reached for the catsup.

He noticed that Mother was not eating much, which surprised him. Dad was not eating much either but Dad often just picked at his food… he became aware with sudden warm pity that Dad was thinner and grayer than ever. How old was Dad?

His attention was diverted by a story his sister was telling: "—and so the Commandant told me I would have to clamp down. And I said to her, 'Ma'am, girls will be girls. It I have to bust a petty officer everytime one of them does something like that, pretty soon I won't have anything but privates. And Sergeant Dvorak is the best gunner I have.'"

"Just a second," her father interrupted. "I thought you said 'Kelly,' not 'Dvorak.'"

"I did and she did. Pretending to misunderstand which sergeant she meant was my secret weapon—for I had Dvorak cold for the same offense, and Tiny Dvorak (she's bigger than I am) is the Squadron's white hope for the annual corps-wide competition for best trooper. Of course, losing her stripes would put her, and us, out of the running.

"So I straightened out the 'mix up' in my best wide-eyed, thick-headed manner, let the old gal sit for a moment trying not to bite her nails, then told her that I had both women confined to barracks until that gang of college boys was through installing the new 'scope, and sang her a song about how the quality of mercy is not strained, it droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven, and made myself responsible for seeing to it that she was not again embarrassed by scandalous—her word, not mine—scandalous incidents…especially when she was showing quadrant commanders around.

"So she grumpily allowed as how the company commander was responsible for her company and she would hold me to it and now would I get out and let her work on the quarterly training report in peace? So I threw her my best parade ground salute and got out so fast I left a hole in the air."

"I wonder," Mr. Walker said judicially, "if you should oppose your commanding officer in such matters? After all, she is older and presumably wiser than you are."

Helen made a little pile of the last of her baby's buttons, scooped them up and swallowed them. "Fiddlesticks squared and cubed. Pardon me, Pater, but if you had any military service you would know better. I am as tough as blazes to my girls myself…and it just makes them boast about how they've got the worst fire-eater in twenty planets. But if

they're in trouble higher up, I've got to take care of my kids. There always comes a day when there is something sticky up ahead and I have to stand up and walk toward it. And it will be all right because I'll have Kelly on my right flank and Dvorak on my left and each of them trying to take care of Maw Walker all by her ownself. I know what I'm doing. 'Walker's Werewolves' are a team."

Mrs. Walker shivered. "Gracious, darling, I wish you had never taken up a calling so…well, so *dangerous*."

Helen shrugged. "The death rate is the same for us as for anybody…one person, one death, sooner or later. What would you want, Mum? With eighteen million more women than men on this continent did you want me to sit and knit until my knight comes riding? Out where I operate, there are more men than women; I'll wing one yet, old and ugly as I am."

Rod asked curiously, "Sis, would you really give up your commission to get married?"

"Would I! I won't even count his arms and legs. If he is still warm and can nod his head, he's had it. My target is six babies and a farm."

Rod looked her over. "I'd say your chances are good. You're quite pretty even if your ankles are thick."

"Thanks, pardner. Thank you too much. What's for dessert, Mum?"

"I didn't look. Will you open it, dear?"

Dessert turned out to be iced mangorines, which pleased Rod. His sister went on talking. "The Service isn't a bad shake, on active duty. It's garrison duty that wears. My kids get fat and sloppy and restless and start fighting with each other from sheer boredom. For my choice, barracks casualties are more to be dreaded than combat. I'm hoping that our squadron will be tagged to take part in the pacification of Byer's Planet."

Mr. Walker looked at his wife, then at his daughter. "You have upset your mother again, my dear. Quite a bit of this talk has hardly been appropriate under the Light of Peace."

"I was asked questions, I answered."

"Well, perhaps so."

Helen glanced up. "Isn't it time to turn it out, anyway? We all seem to have finished eating."

"Why, if you like. Though it is hardly reverent to hurry."

"The Principle knows we haven't all eternity." She turned to Rod. "How about making yourself scarce, mate? I want to make palaver with the folks."

"Gee, Sis, you act as if I was—"

"Get lost, Buddy. I'll see you later."

Rod left, feeling affronted. He saw Helen blow out the pax lamp as he did so.

He was still making lists when his sister came to his room. “Hi, kid.”

“Oh. Hello, Sis.”

“What are you doing? Figuring what to take on your solo?”

“Sort of.”

“Mind if I get comfortable?” She brushed articles from his bed and sprawled on it. “We’ll go into that later.”

Rod thought it over. “Does that mean Dad won’t object?”

“Yes. I pounded his head until he saw the light. But, as I said, well go into that later. I’ve got something to tell you, youngster.”

“Such as?”

“The first thing is this. Our parents are not as stupid as you probably think they are. Fact is, they are pretty bright.”

“I never said they were stupid!” Rod answered, comfortably aware of what his thoughts had been.

“No. But I heard what went on before dinner and so did you. Dad was throwing his weight around and not listening. But, Buddy, it has probably never occurred to you that it is hard work to be a parent, maybe the hardest job of all—particularly when you have no talent for it, which Dad hasn’t. He knows it and works hard at it and is conscientious. Mostly he does mighty well. Sometimes he slips, like tonight. But, what you did not know is this: Dad is going to die.”

“*What?*” Rod looked stricken. “I didn’t know he was ill!”

“You weren’t meant to know. Now climb down off the ceiling; there is a way out. Dad is terribly ill, and he would die in a few weeks at the most—unless something drastic is done. But something is going to be. So relax.”

She explained the situation bluntly: Mr. Walker was suffering from a degenerative disease under which he was slowly starving to death. His condition was incurable by current medical art; he might linger on, growing weaker each day, for weeks or months—but he would certainly die soon.

Rod leaned his head on his hands and chastised himself. Dad dying…and he hadn’t *even noticed*. They had kept it from him, like a baby, and he had been too stupid to see it.

His sister touched his shoulder. “Cut it out. If there is anything stupider than flogging yourself over something you can’t help, I’ve yet to meet it. Anyhow, we are doing something about it.”

“What? I thought you said nothing could be done?”

“Shut up and let your mind coast. The folks are going to make a Ramsbotham jump, five hundred to one, twenty years for two weeks. They’ve already signed a contract with Entropy, Incorporated. Dad has resigned from General Synthetics and is closing up his affairs; they’ll kiss the world good-by this coming Wednesday—which is why he was being stern about your plans to be away at that time. You’re the apple of his eye—Heaven knows why.”

Rod tried to sort out too many new ideas at once. A time jump…of course! It would let Dad stay alive another twenty years. But—“Say, Sis, this doesn’t get them anything! Sure, it’s twenty years but it will be just two weeks to them…and Dad will be as sick as ever. I know what I’m talking about; they did the same thing for Hank Robbin’s great grandfather and he died anyhow, right after they took him out of the stasis. Hank told me.”

Captain Walker shrugged. “Probably a hopeless case to start with. But Dad’s specialist, Dr. Hensley, says that he is morally certain that Dad’s case is not hopeless…twenty years from now. I don’t know anything about metabolic medicine, but Hensley says that they are on the verge and that twenty years from now they ought to be able to patch Dad up as easily they can graft on a new leg today.”

“You really think so?”

“How should I know? In things like this you hire the best expert you can, then follow his advice. The point is, if we don’t do it, Dad is finished. So we do it.”

“Yeah. Sure, sure, we’ve got to.”

She eyed him closely and added, “All right. Now do you want to talk with them about it?”

“Huh?” He was startled by the shift. “Why? Are they waiting for me?”

“No. I persuaded them that it was best to keep it from you until it happened. Then I came straight in and told you. Now you can do as you please—pretend you don’t know, or go have Mum cry over you, and listen to a lot of last-minute, man-to-man advice from Dad that you will never take. About midnight, with your nerves frazzled, you can get back to your preparations for your survival test. Play it your own way—but I’ve rigged it so you can avoid that, if you want to. Easier on everybody. Myself, I like a cat’s way of saying good-by.”

Rod’s mind was in a turmoil. Not to say good-by seemed unnatural, ungrateful, untrue to family sentiment—but the prospect of saying good-by seemed almost unbearably embarrassing. “What’s that about a cat?”

“When a cat greets you, he makes a big operation of it, humping, stropping your legs, buzzing like mischief. But when he leaves, he just walks off and never looks back. Cats are smart.”

"Well…"

"I suggest," she added, "that you remember that they are doing this for their convenience, not yours."

"But Dad has to—"

"Surely, Dad must, if he is to get well." She considered pointing out that the enormous expense of the time jump would leave Rod practically penniless; she decided that this was better left undiscussed. "But Mum does not have to."

"But she has to go with Dad!"

"So? Use arithmetic. She prefers leaving you alone for twenty years in order to be with Dad for two weeks. Or turn it around: she prefers having you orphaned to having herself widowed for the same length of time."

"I don't think that's quite fair to Mum," Rod answered slowly.

"I wasn't criticizing. She's making the right decision. Nevertheless, they both have a strong feeling of guilt about you and—"

"About *me?*"

"About you. I don't figure into it. If you insist on saying good-by, their guilt will come out as self-justification and self-righteousness and they will find ways to take it out on you and everybody will have a bad time. I don't want that. You are all my family."

"Uh, maybe you know best."

"I didn't get straight A's in emotional logic and military leadership for nothing. Man is not a rational animal; he is a rationalizing animal. Now let's see what you plan to take with you."

She looked over his lists and equipment, then whistled softly. "Whew! Rod, I never saw so much plunder. You won't be able to move. Who are you? Tweedledum preparing for battle, or the White Knight?"

"Well, I was going to thin it down," he answered uncomfortably.

"I should think so!"

"Uh, Sis, what sort of gun should I carry?"

"Huh? Why the deuce do you want a gun?"

"Why, for what I might run into, of course. Wild animals and things. Deacon Matson practically said that we could expect dangerous animals."

"I doubt if he advised you to carry a gun. From his reputation, Dr. Matson is a practical man. See here, infant, on this tour you are the rabbit, trying to escape the fox. You aren't the fox."

"What do you mean?"

"Your only purpose is to stay alive. Not to be brave, not to fight, not to dominate the wilds—but just stay breathing. One time in a hundred a

gun might save your life; the other ninety-nine it will just tempt you into folly. Oh, no doubt Matson would take one, and I would, too. But we are salted; we know when not to use one. But consider this. That test area is going to be crawling with trigger-happy young squirts. If one shoots you, it won't matter that you have a gun, too—because you will be dead. But if you carry a gun, it makes you feel cocky; you won't take proper cover. If you don't have one, then you'll *know* that you are the rabbit. You'll be careful."

"Did you take a gun on your solo test?"

"I did. And I lost it the first day. Which saved my life."

"How?"

"Because when I was caught without one I ran away from a Bessmer's griffin instead of trying to shoot it. You savvy Bessmer's griffin?"

"Uh, Spica V?"

"Spica IV. I don't know how much outer zoology they are teaching you kids these days—from the ignoramuses we get for recruits I've reached the conclusion that this new-fangled 'functional education' has abolished studying in favor of developing their cute little personalities. Why I had one girl who wanted to—never mind; the thing about the griffin is that it does not really have vital organs. Its nervous system is decentralized, even its assimilation system. To kill it quickly you would have to grind it into hamburger. Shooting merely tickles it. But not know that; if I had had my gun I would have found out the hard way. As it was, it treed me for three days, which did my figure good and gave me time to think over the philosophy, ethics, and pragmatics of self-preservation."

Rod did not argue, but he still had a conviction that a gun was a handy thing to have around. It made him feel good, taller, stronger and more confident, to have one slapping against his thigh. He didn't have to use it—not unless he just had to. And he knew enough to take cover; nobody in the class could do a silent sneak the way he could. While Sis was a good soldier, still she didn't know everything and—

But Sis was still talking. "I know how good a gun feels. It makes you bright-eyed and bushy-tailed, three meters tall and covered with hair. You're ready for anything and kind of hoping you'll find it. Which is exactly what is dangerous about it—because you aren't anything of the sort. You are a feeble, hairless embryo, remarkably easy to kill. You could carry an assault gun with two thousand meters precision range and isotope charges that will blow up a hill, but you still would not have eyes in the back of your head like a janus bird, nor be able to see in the dark like the Thetis pygmies. Death can cuddle up behind you while you are drawing a bead on something in front."

"But, Sis, your own company carries guns."

“Guns, radar, bombs, black scopes, gas, warpers, and some things which we light-heartedly hope are secret. What of it? You aren’t going to storm a city. Buddy, sometimes I send a girl out on an infiltration patrol, object: information—go out, find out, come back alive. How do you suppose I equip her?”

“Uh—”

“Never mind. In the first place I don’t pick an eager young recruit; I send some unkillable old-timer. She peels down to her underwear, darkens her skin if it is not dark, and goes out bare-handed and bare-footed, without so much as a fly swatter. I have yet to lose a scout that way. Helpless and unprotected you do grow eye’s in the back of your head, and your nerve ends reach out and feel everything around you. I learned that when I was a brash young j.o., from a salty trooper old enough to be my mother.”

Impressed, Rod said slowly, “Deacon Matson told us he would make us take this test bare-handed, if he could.”

“Dr. Matson is a man of sense.”

“Well, what would *you* take?”

“Test conditions again?”

Rod stated them. Captain Walker frowned. “Mmm…not much to go on. Two to ten days probably means about five. The climate won’t be hopelessly extreme. I suppose you own a Baby Bunting?”

“No, but I’ve got a combat parka suit. I thought I would carry it, then if the test area turned out not to be cold, I’d leave it at the gate. I’d hate to lose it; it weighs only half a kilo and cost quite a bit.”

“Don’t worry about that. There is no point in being the best dressed ghost in Limbo. Okay, besides your parka I would make it four kilos of rations, five of water, two kilos of sundries like pills and matches, all in a vest pack…and a knife.”

“That isn’t much for five days, much less ten.”

“It is all you can carry and still be light on your feet. Let’s see your knife, dear.”

Rod had several knives, but one was “his” knife, a lovely all-purpose one with a 21-cm. molysteel blade and a fine balance. He handed it to his sister, who cradled it lightly. “Nice!” she said, and glanced around the room.

“Over there by the outflow.”

“I see.” She whipped it past her ear, let fly, and the blade sank into the target, sung and quivered. She reached down and drew another from her boot top. “This is a good one, too.” She threw and it bit into the target a blade’s width from the first.

She retrieved both knives, stood balancing them, one on each hand. She flipped her own so that the grip was toward Rod. “This is my pet,

‘Lady Macbeth.’ I carried her on my own solo, Buddy. I want you to carry her on yours.”

“You want to trade knives? All right.” Rod felt a sharp twinge at parting with “Colonel Bowie” and a feeling of dismay that some other knife might let him down. But it was not an offer that he could refuse, not from Sis.

“My very dear! I wouldn’t deprive you of your own knife, not on your solo. I want you to carry both, Buddy. You won’t starve nor die of thirst, but a spare knife may be worth its weight in thorium.”

“Gee, Sis! But I shouldn’t take your knife, either—you said you were expecting active duty. I can carry a spare of my own.”

“I won’t need it. My girls haven’t let me use a knife in years. I want you to have Lady Macbeth on your test.” She removed the scabbard from her boot top, sheathed the blade; and handed it to him. “Wear it in good health, brother.”

3

Through the Tunnel

ROD ARRIVED AT TEMPLETON GATE THE NEXT MORNING feeling not his best. He had intended to get a good night's sleep in preparation for his ordeal, but his sister's arrival in conjunction with overwhelming changes in his family had defeated his intention. As with most children Rod had taken his family and home for granted; he had not thought about them much, nor placed a conscious value on them, any more than a fish treasures water. They simply were.

Now suddenly they were not.

Helen and he had talked late. She had begun to have strong misgivings about her decision to let him know of the change on the eve of his test. She had weighed it, decided that it was the "right" thing to do, then had learned the ages-old sour truth that right and wrong can sometimes be determined only through hindsight. It had not been fair, she later concluded, to load anything else on his mind just before his test; But it had not seemed fair, either, to let him leave without knowing…to return to an empty house.

The decision was necessarily hers; she had been his guardian since earlier that same day. The papers had been signed and sealed; the court had given approval. Now she found with a sigh that being a "parent" was not unalloyed pleasure; it was more like the soul-searching that had gone into her first duty as member of a court martial.

When she saw that her "baby" was not quieting, she had insisted that he go to bed anyhow, then had given him a long back rub, combining it with hypnotic instructions to sleep, then had gone quietly away when he seemed asleep.

But Rod had not been asleep; he had simply wanted to be alone. His mind raced like an engine with no load for the best part of an hour, niggling uselessly at the matter of his father's illness, wondering what it was going to be like to greet them again after twenty years—why, he would be almost as old as Mum!—switching over to useless mental preparations for unknown test conditions.

At last he realized that he had to sleep—forced himself to run through mental relaxing exercises, emptying his mind and hypnotizing himself. It took longer than ever before but finally he entered a great, golden, warm cloud and was asleep.

His bed mechanism had to call him twice. He woke bleary-eyed and was still so after a needle shower. He looked in a mirror, decided that shaving did not matter where he was going and anyhow he was late—

then decided to shave after all…being painfully shy about his sparse young growth.

Mum was not up, but she hardly ever got up as early as that. Dad rarely ate breakfast these days… Rod recalled why with a twinge. But he had expected Sis to show up. Glumly he opened his tray and discovered that Mum had forgotten to dial an order, something that had not happened twice in his memory. He placed his order and waited for service—another ten minutes lost.

Helen showed up as he was leaving, dressed surprisingly in a dress. "Good morning."

"Hi, Sis. Say, you'll have to order your own tucker. Mother didn't and I didn't know what you wanted."

"Oh, I had breakfast hours ago. I was waiting to see you off."

"Oh. Well, so long. I've got to run, I'm late."

"I won't hold you up." She came over and embraced him. "Take it easy, mate. That's the important thing. More people have died from worry than ever bled to death. And if you do have to strike, strike low."

"Uh, I'll remember."

"See that you do. I'm going to get my leave extended today so that I'll be here when you come back." She kissed him. "Now run."

Dr. Matson was sitting at a desk outside the dispensary at Templeton Gate, checking names on his roll. He looked up as Rod arrived. "Why, hello, Walker. I thought maybe you had decided to be smart."

"I'm sorry I'm late, sir. Things happened."

"Don't fret about it. Knew a man once who didn't get shot at sunrise because he overslept the appointment."

"Really? Who was he?"

"Young fellow I used to know. Myself."

"Hunh? You really did, sir? You mean you were—"

"Not a word of truth in it. Good stories are rarely true. Get on in there and take your physical, before you get the docs irritated."

They thumped him and x-rayed him and made a wavy pattern from his brain and did all the indignities that examining physicians do. The senior examiner listened to his heart and felt his moist hand. "Scared, son?"

"Of course I am!" Rod blurted.

"Of course you are. If you weren't, I wouldn't pass you. What's that bandage on your leg?"

"Uh—" The bandage concealed Helen's knife "Lady Macbeth." Rod sheepishly admitted the fact.

“Take it off.”

“Sir?”

“I’ve known candidates to pull dodges like that to cover up a disqualification. So let’s have a look.”

Rod started removing it; the physician let him continue until he was sure that it was a cache for a weapon and not a wound dressing. “Get your clothes on. Report to your instructor.”

Rod put on his vest pack of rations and sundries, fastened his canteen under it. It was a belt canteen of flexible synthetic divided into half-litre pockets. The weight was taken by shoulder straps and a tube ran up the left suspender, ending in a nipple near his mouth, so that he might drink wit out taking it off. He planned, if possible, to stretch his meager supply through the whole test, avoiding the hazards of contaminated water and the greater hazards of the water hole—assuming that fresh water could be found at all.

He wrapped twenty meters of line, light, strong, and thin, around his waist. Shorts, overshirt, trousers, and boot moccasins completed his costume; he belted “Colonel Bowie” on outside. Dressed, he looked fleshier than he was; only his knife showed. He carried his parka suit over his left arm. It was an efficient garment, hooded, with built-in boots and gloves, and with pressure seams to let him use bare hands when necessary, but it was much too warm to wear until he needed it. Rod had learned early in the game that Eskimos don’t dare to sweat.

Dr. Matson was outside the dispensary door. “The late Mr. Walker,” he commented, then glanced at the bulkiness of Rod’s torso. “Body armor, son?”

“No, sir. Just a vest pack.”

“How much penalty you carrying?”

“Eleven kilograms. Mostly water and rations.”

“Mmm…well, it will get heavier before it gets lighter. No Handy-Dandy Young Pioneer’s Kit? No collapsible patent wigwam?”

Rod blushed. “No, sir.”

“You can leave that snow suit. I’ll mail it to your home.”

“Uh, thank you, sir.” Rod passed it over, adding, “I wasn’t sure I’d need it, but I brought it along, just in case.”

“You did need it.”

“Sir?”

“I’ve already flunked five for showing up without their snuggies…and four for showing up *with* vacuum suits. Both ways for being stupid. They ought to know that the Board would not dump them into vacuum or chlorine or such without specifying space suits in the test notice. We’re looking for graduates, not casualties. On the other hand, cold

weather is within the limits of useful test conditions."

Rod glanced at the suit he had passed over. "You're sure I won't need it, sir?"

"Quite. Except that you would have flunked if you hadn't fetched it. Now bear a hand and draw whatever pig shooter you favor; the armorer is anxious to close up shop. What gun have you picked?"

Rod gulped. "Uh, I was thinking about not taking one, Deacon—I mean 'Doctor.'"

"You can call me 'Deacon' to my face—ten days from now. But this notion of yours interests me. How did you reach that conclusion?"

"Uh, why, you see, sir…well, my sister suggested it."

"So? I must meet your sister. What's her name?"

"Assault Captain Helen Walker," Rod said proudly, "Corps of Amazons."

Matson wrote it down. "Get on in there. They are ready for the drawing."

Rod hesitated. "Sir," he said with sudden misgiving, "if I did carry a gun, what sort would you advise?"

Matson looked disgusted. "I spend a year trying to spoon-feed you kids with stuff I learned the hard way. Comes examination and you ask me to slip you the answers. I can no more answer that than I would have been justified yesterday in telling you to bring a snow suit."

"Sorry, sir."

"No reason why you shouldn't ask; it's just that I won't answer. Let's change the subject. This sister of yours she must be quite a girl."

"Oh, she is, sir."

"Mmm…maybe if I had met a girl like that I wouldn't be a cranky old bachelor now. Get in there and draw your number. Number one goes through in six minutes."

"Yes, Doctor." His way led him past the school armorer, who had set up a booth outside the door. The old chap was wiping off a noiseless Summerfield. Rod caught his eye. "Howdy, Guns."

"Hi, Jack. Kind of late, aren't you? What'll it be?"

Rod's eye ran over the rows of beautiful weapons. Maybe just a little needle gun with poisoned pellets… He wouldn't have to *use* it…

Then he realized that Dr. Matson had answered his question, with a very broad hint. "Uh, I'm already heeled, Guns. Thanks."

"Okay. Well, good luck, and hurry back."

"Thanks a lot." He went into the gate room.

The seminar had numbered more than fifty students; there were about twenty waiting to take the examination. He started to look

around, was stopped by a gate attendant who called out, “Over here! Draw your number.”

The lots were capsules in a bowl. Rod reached in, drew one out, and broke it open. “Number seven.”

“Lucky seven! Congratulations. Your name, please.”

Rod gave his name and turned away, looking for a seat, since it appeared that he had twenty minutes or so to wait. He walked back, staring with interest at what his schoolmates deemed appropriate for survival, any and all conditions.

Johann Braun was seated with empty seats on each side of him. The reason for the empty seats crouched at his feet—a big, lean, heavily-muscled boxer dog with unfriendly eyes. Slung over Braun’s shoulder was a General Electric Thunderbolt, a shoulder model with telescopic sights and cone-of-fire control; its power pack Braun wore as a back pack. At his belt were binoculars, knife, first aid kit, and three pouches.

Rod stopped and admired the gun, wondering how much the lovely thing had cost. The dog raised his head and growled.

Braun put a hand on the dog’s head. “Keep your distance,” he warned. “Thor is a one-man dog.”

Rod gave back a pace. “Yo, you are certainly equipped.”

The big blond youth gave a satisfied smile. “Thor and I are going to live off the country.”

“You don’t need him, with that cannon.”

“Oh, yes, I do. Thor’s my burglar alarm. With him at my side I can sleep sound. You’d be surprised at the things he can do. Thor’s smarter than most people.”

“Shouldn’t wonder.”

“The Deacon gave me some guff that the two of us made a team and should go through separately. I explained to him that Thor would tear the joint apart if they tried to separate us.” Braun caressed the dog’s ears. “I’d rather team with Thor than with a platoon of Combat Pioneers.”

“Say, Yo, how about letting me try that stinger? After we come out, I mean.”

“I don’t mind. It really is a honey. You can pick off a sparrow in the air as easily as you can drop a moose at a thousand meters. Say, you’re making Thor nervous. See you later.”

Rod took the hint, moved on and sat down. He looked around, having in mind that he might still arrange a survival team. Near the shuttered arch of the gateway there was a priest with a boy kneeling in front of him, with four others waiting.

The boy who had been receiving the blessing stood up—and Rod

stood up hastily. “Hey! *Jimmy!*”

Jimmy Throxton looked around, caught his eye and grinned, hurried over. “Rod!” he said, “I thought you had ducked out on me. Look, you haven’t teamed?”

“No.”

“Still want to?”

“Huh? Sure.”

“Swell! I can declare the team as I go through as long as you don’t have number two. You don’t, do you?”

“No.”

“Good! Because I’m—”

“*NUMBER ONE!*” the gate attendant called out. “‘Throxton, James.’”

Jimmy Throxton looked startled. “Oh, gee!” He hitched at his gun belt and turned quickly away, then called over his shoulder, “See you on the other side!” He trotted toward the gate, now unshuttered.

Rod called out, “Hey, Jimmy! How are we going to find—” But it was too late. Well, if Jimmy had sense enough to drive nails, he would keep an eye on the exit.

“Number two! Mshiyeni, Caroline.” Across the room the big Zulu girl who had occurred to Rod as a possible team mate got up and headed for the gate. She was dressed simply in shirt and shorts, with her feet and legs and hands bare. She did not appear to be armed but she was carrying an overnight bag.

Someone called out, “Hey, Carol! What you got in the trunk?”

She threw him a grin. “Rocks.”

“Ham sandwiches, I’ll bet. Save me one.”

“I’ll save you a rock, sweetheart.”

Too soon the attendant called out, “Number seven—Walker, Roderick L.”

Rod went quickly to the gate. The attendant shoved a paper into his hand, then shook hands. “Good luck, kid. Keep your eyes open.” He gave Rod a slap on the back that urged him through the opening, dilated to man size.

Rod found himself on the other side and, to his surprise, still indoors. But that shock was not as great as immediate unsteadiness and nausea; the gravity acceleration was much less than earth-normal.

He fought to keep from throwing up and tried to figure things out. Where was he? On Luna? On one of Jupiter’s moons? Or somewhere ’way out there?

The Moon, most likely—Luna. Many of the longer jumps were

relayed through Luna because of the danger of mixing with a primary, particularly with binaries. But surely they weren't going to leave him here; Matson had promised them no airless test areas.

On the floor lay an open valise; he recognized it absent-mindedly as the one Caroline had been carrying. At last he remembered to look at the paper he had been handed.

It read:

SOLO SURVIVAL TEST-Recall Instructions

1. You must pass through the door ahead in the three minutes allowed you before another candidate is started through. An overlapping delay will disqualify you.
2. Recall will be by standard visual and sound signals. You are warned that the area remains hazardous even after recall is sounded.
3. The exit gate will not be the entrance gate. Exit may be as much as twenty kilometers in the direction of sunrise.
4. There is no truce zone outside the gate. Test starts at once. Watch out for stobor. Good luck!

—B. P. M.

Rod was still gulping at low gravity and staring at the paper when a door opened at the far end of the long, narrow room he was in. A man shouted, "Hurry up! You'll lose your place."

Rod tried to hurry, staggered and then recovered too much and almost fell. He had experienced low gravity on field trips and his family had once vacationed on Luna, but he was not used to it; with difficulty he managed to skate toward the far door.

Beyond the door was another gate room. The attendant glanced at the timer over the gate and said, "Twenty seconds. Give me that instruction sheet."

Rod hung onto it. "I'll use the twenty seconds."—*as much as twenty kilometers in the direction of sunrise*. A nominal eastward direction—call it "east." But what the deuce was, or were, "stobor"?

"Time! Through you go." The attendant snatched the paper, shutters rolled back, and Rod was shoved through a dilated gate.

He fell to his hands and knees; the gravity beyond was something close to earth-normal and the change had caught him unprepared. But he stayed down, held perfectly still and made no sound while he quickly looked around him. He was in a wide clearing covered with high grass and containing scattered trees and bushes; beyond was dense forest.

He twisted his neck in a hasty survey. Earth-type planet, near normal acceleration, probably a G-type sun in the sky…heavy vegetation, no fauna in sight—but that didn't mean anything; there might be hundreds within hearing. Even a stobor, whatever that was.

The gate was behind him, tall dark-green shutters which were in reality a long way off. They stood unsupported in the tall grass, an anomalism unrelated to the primitive scene. Rod considered wriggling around behind the gate, knowing that the tangency was one-sided and that he would be able to see through the locus from the other side, see anyone who came out without himself being seen.

Which reminded him that he himself could be seen from that exceptional point; he decided to move.

Where was Jimmy? Jimmy ought to be behind the gate, watching for him to come out…or watching from some other spy point. The only certain method of rendezvous was for Jimmy to have waited for Rod's appearance; Rod had no way to find him now.

Rod looked around more slowly and tried to spot anything that might give a hint as to Jimmy's whereabouts. Nothing…but when his scanning came back to the gate, the gate was no longer there.

Rod felt cold ripple of adrenalin shock trickle down his back and out his finger tips. He forced himself to quiet down and told himself that it was better this way. He had a theory to account for the disappearance of the gate; they were, he decided, refocusing it between each pair of students, scattering them possibly kilometers apart.

No, that could not be true—"twenty kilometers toward sunrise" had to relate to a small area.

Or did it? He reminded himself that the orientation given in the sheet handed him might not be that which appeared in some other student's instruction sheet. He relaxed to the fact that he did not really know anything…he did not know where he was, nor where Jimmy was, nor any other member of the class, he did not know what he might find here, save that it was a place where a man might stay alive if he were smart—and lucky.

Just now his business was to stay alive, for a period that he might as well figure as ten Earth days. He wiped Jimmy Throxton out of his mind, wiped out everything but the necessity of remaining unceasingly alert to all of his surroundings. He noted wind direction as shown by grass plumes and started crawling cautiously down wind.

The decision to go down wind had been difficult. To go up wind had been his first thought, that being the natural direction for a stalk. But his sister's advice had already paid off; he felt naked and helpless without a gun and it had reminded him that he was not the hunter. His scent would carry in any case; if he went down wind he stood a chance of seeing what might be stalking him, while his unguarded rear would be comparatively safe.

Something ahead in the grass!

He froze and watched. It had been the tiniest movement; he waited. There it was again, moving slowly from right to left across his front. It looked like a dark spike with a tuft of hair on the tip, a tail possibly, carried aloft.

He never saw what manner of creature owned the tail, if it was a tail. It stopped suddenly at a point Rod judged to be directly down wind, then moved off rapidly and he lost Sight of it. He waited a few minutes, then resumed crawling.

It was extremely hot work and sweat poured down him and soaked his overshirt and trousers. He began to want a drink very badly but reminded himself that five liters of water would not last long if he started drinking the first hour of the test. The sky was overcast with high cirrus haze, but the primary or "sun"—he decided to call it the Sun—seemed to burn through fiercely. It was low in the sky behind him; he wondered what it would be like overhead? Kill a man, maybe. Oh, well, it would be cooler in that forest ahead, or at least not be the same chance of sunstroke.

There was lower ground ahead of him and hawklike birds were circling above the spot, round and round. He held still and watched. Brothers, he said softly, if you are behaving like vultures back home, there is something dead ahead of me and you are waiting to make sure it stays dead before you drop in for lunch. If so, I had better swing wide, for it is bound to attract other things…some of which I might not want to meet.

He started easing to the right, quartering the light breeze. It took him onto higher ground and close to a rock outcropping. Rod decided to spy out what was in the lower place below, making use of cover to let him reach an overhanging rock.

It looked mightily like a man on the ground and a child near him. Rod reached, fumbled in his vest pack, got out a tiny 8-power monocular, took a better look. The man was Johann Braun, the "child" was his boxer dog. There was no doubt but that they were dead, for Braun was lying like a tossed rag doll, with his head twisted around and one leg bent under. His throat and the side of his head were a dark red stain.

While Rod watched, a doglike creature trotted out, sniffed at the boxer, and began tearing at it…then the first of the buzzard creatures landed to join the feast. Rod took the glass from his eye, feeling queasy. Old Yo had not lasted long—jumped by a "stobor" maybe—and his smart dog had not saved him. Too bad! But it did prove that there were carnivores around and it behooved him to be careful if he did not want to have jackals and vultures arguing over the leavings!

He remembered something and put the glass back to his eye. Yo's proud Thunderbolt gun was nowhere in sight and the corpse was not

wearing the power pack that energized it. Rod gave a low whistle in his mind and thought. The only animal who would bother to steal a gun ran around on two legs. Rod reminded himself that a Thunderbolt could kill at almost any line-of-sight range—and now somebody had it who obviously took advantage of the absence of law and order in a survival test area.

Well, the only thing to do was not to be in line of sight. He backed off the rock and slid into the bushes.

The forest had appeared to be two kilometers away, or less, when he had started. He was close to it when he became uncomfortably aware that sunset was almost upon him. He became less cautious, more hurried, as he planned to spend the night in a tree. This called for light to climb by, since he relished a night on the ground inside the forest still less than he liked the idea of crouching helpless in the grass.

It had not taken all day to crawl this far. Although it had been morning when he had left Templeton Gate the time of day there had nothing to do with the time of day here. He had been shoved through into late afternoon; it was dusk when he reached the tall trees.

So dusky that he decided that he must accept a calculated risk for what he must do. He stopped at the edge of the forest, still in the high grass, and dug into his pack for his climbers. His sister had caused him to leave behind most of the gadgets, gimmicks, and special-purpose devices that he had considered bringing; she had not argued at these. They were climbing spikes of a style basically old, but refined, made small and light—the pair weighed less than a tenth of a kilogram—and made foldable and compact, from a titanium alloy, hard and strong.

He unfolded them, snapped them under his arches and around his shins, and locked them in place. Then he eyed the tree he had picked, a tall giant deep enough in the mass to allow the possibility of crossing to another tree if the odds made a back-door departure safer and having a trunk which, in spite of its height, he felt sure he could get his arms around.

Having picked his route, he straightened up and at a fast dogtrot headed for the nearest tree. He went past it, cut left for another tree, passed it and cut right toward the tree he wanted. He was about fifteen meters from it when something charged him.

He closed the gap with instantaneous apportation which would have done credit to a Ramsbotham hyperfold. He reached the first branch, ten meters above ground, in what amounted to levitation. From there on he climbed more conventionally, digging the spurs into the tree’s smooth bark and setting his feet more comfortably on branches when they began to be close enough together to form a ladder.

About twenty meters above ground he stopped and looked down. The branches interfered and it was darker under the trees than it had been out in the open; nevertheless he could see, prowling around the

tree, the denizen that had favored him with attention.

Rod tried to get a better view, but the light was failing rapidly. But it looked like…well, if he had not been certain that he was on some uncolonized planet 'way out behind and beyond, he would have said that it was a *lion*.

Except that it looked eight times as big as any lion ought to look.

He hoped that, whatever it was, it could not climb trees. Oh, quit fretting, Rod!—if it had been able to climb you would have been lunch meat five minutes ago. Get busy and rig a place to sleep before it gets pitch dark. He moved up the tree, keeping an eye out for the spot he needed.

He found it presently, just as he was beginning to think that he would have to go farther down. He needed two stout branches far enough apart and near enough the same level to let him stretch a hammock. Having found such, he worked quickly to beat the failing light. From a pocket of his vest pack he took out his hammock, a web strong as spider silk and almost as thin and light. Using the line around his waist he stretched it, made sure his lashings would hold and then started to get into it.

A double-jointed acrobat with prehensile toes might have found it easy; a slack-wire artist would simply have walked into it and sat down. But Rod found that he needed sky hooks. He almost fell out of the tree.

The hammock was a practical piece of equipment and Rod had slept in it before. His sister had approved it, remarking that it was a better model than the field hammock they gave her girls. "Just don't sit up in your sleep."

"I won't," Rod had assured her. "Anyway, I always fasten the chest belt."

But he had never slung it in this fashion. There was nothing to stand on under the hammock, no tree limb above it close enough to let him chin himself into it. After several awkward and breath-catching attempts he began to wonder whether he should perch like a bird the rest of the night, or drape himself in the notch of a limb. He did not consider spending the night on the ground—not with that *thing* prowling around.

There was another limb higher up almost directly over the hammock. Maybe if he tossed the end of his line over it and used it to steady himself…

He tried it. But it was almost pitch dark now; the only reason he did not lose his line was that one end was bent to the hammock. At last he gave up and made one more attempt to crawl into the hammock by main force and extreme care. Bracing both hands wide on each side of the head rope he scooted his feet out slowly and cautiously. Presently he had his legs inside the hammock, then his buttocks. From there on it

was a matter of keeping his center of gravity low and making no sudden moves while he insinuated his body farther down into the cocoon.

At last he could feel himself fully and firmly supported. He took a deep breath, sighed, and let himself relax. It was the first time he had felt either safe or comfortable since passing through the gate.

After a few minutes of delicious rest Rod located the nipple of his canteen and allowed himself two swallows of water, after which he prepared supper. This consisted in digging out a quarter-kilo brick of field ration, eleven hundred calories of yeast protein, fat, starch, and glucose, plus trace requirements. The label on it, invisible in the dark, certified that it was "tasty, tempting and pleasing in texture," whereas chewing an old shoe would have attracted a gourmet quite as much.

But real hunger gave Rod the best of sauces. He did not let any crumb escape and ended by licking the wrapper. He thought about opening another one, quelled the longing, allowed himself one more mouthful of water, then pulled the insect hood of the hammock down over his face and fastened it under the chest belt. He was immune to most insect-carried Terran diseases and was comfortably aware that humans were not subject to most Outlands diseases, but he did not want the night fliers to use his face as a drinking fountain, nor even as a parade ground.

He was too hot even in his light clothing. He considered shucking down to his shorts; this planet, or this part of this planet, seemed quite tropical. But it was awkward; tonight he must stay as he was, even if it meant wasting a day's ration of water in sweat. He wondered what planet this was, then tried to peer through the roof of the forest to see if he could recognize stars. But either the trees were impenetrable or the sky was overcast; he could see nothing. He attempted to draw everything out of his mind and sleep.

Ten minutes later he was wider awake than ever. Busy with his hammock, busy with his dinner, he had not paid attention to distant sounds; now he became aware of all the voices of the night. Insects buzzed and sang and strummed, foliage rustled and whispered, something coughed below him. The cough was answered by insane laughter that ran raggedly up, then down, and died in asthmatic choking.

Rod hoped that it was a bird.

He found himself straining to hear every sound, near and far, holding his breath. He told himself angrily to stop it; he was safe from at least nine-tenths of potential enemies. Even a snake, if this place ran to such, would be unlikely to crawl out to the hammock, still less likely to attack—if he held still. Snakes, button-brained as they were, showed little interest in anything too big to swallow. The chances of anything big enough to hurt him—and interested in hurting him—being in this

treetop were slim. So forget those funny noises, pal, and go to sleep. After all, they're no more important than traffic noises in a city.

He reminded himself of the Deacon's lecture on alarm reaction, the thesis that most forms of death could be traced to the body's coming too urgently to battle stations, remaining too long at full alert. Or, as his sister had put it, more people worry themselves to death than bleed to death. He set himself conscientiously to running through the mental routines intended to produce sleep.

He almost made it. The sound that pulled him out of warm drowsiness came from far away; involuntarily he roused himself to hear it. It sounded almost human…no, it *was* human—the terrible sound of a grown man crying with heartbreak, the deep, retching, bass sobs that tear the chest.

Rod wondered what he ought to do. It was none of his business and everyone there was on his own—but it went against the grain to hear such agony from a fellow human and ignore it. Should he climb down and feel his way through the dark to wherever the poor wretch was? Stumbling into tree roots, he reminded himself, and falling into holes and maybe walking straight into the jaws of something hungry and big.

Well, should he? Did he have any right *not* to?

It was solved for him by the sobs being answered by more sobs, this time closer and much louder. This new voice did not sound human, much as it was like the first, and it scared him almost out of his hammock. The chest strap saved him.

The second voice was joined by a third, farther away. In a few moments the peace of the night had changed to sobbing, howling ululation of mass fear and agony and defeat unbearable. Rod knew now that this was nothing human, nor anything he had ever heard, or heard of, before. He suddenly had a deep conviction that these were the stobor he had been warned to avoid.

But what were they? How was he to avoid them? The one closest seemed to be higher up than he was and no farther than the next tree… good grief, it might even be *this* tree!

When you meet a stobor in the dark what do you do? Spit in its face? Or ask it to waltz?

One thing was certain: anything that made that much noise in the jungle was not afraid of anything; therefore it behooved him to be afraid of it. But, there being nothing he could do, Rod lay quiet, his fear evidenced only by tense muscles, gooseflesh, and cold sweat. The hellish concert continued with the "stobor" closest to him sounding almost in his pocket. It seemed to have moved closer.

With just a bit more prodding Rod would have been ready to sprout wings and fly. Only at home on the North American continent of Terra had he ever spent a night alone in the wilderness. There the hazards

were known and minor…a few predictable bears, an occasional lazy rattlesnake, dangers easily avoided.

But how could he guard against the utterly unknown? That stobor—he decided that he might as well call it that—that stobor might be moving toward him now, sizing him up with night eyes, deciding whether to drag him home, or eat him where it killed him.

Should he move? And maybe move right into the fangs of the stobor? Or should he wait, helpless, for the stobor to pounce? It was possible that the stobor could not attack him in the tree. But it was equally possible that stobor were completely arboreal and his one chance lay in climbing down quickly and spending the night on the ground.

What was a stobor? How did it fight? Where and when was it dangerous? The Deacon evidently expected the class to know what to do about them. Maybe they had studied the stobor those days he was out of school right after New Year's? Or maybe he had just plain forgotten…and would pay for it with his skin. Rod was good at Outlands zoology—but there was just too much to learn it all. Why, the zoology of Terra alone used to give oldstyle zoologists more than they could handle; how could they expect him to soak up all there was to learn about dozens of planets?

It wasn't *fair!*

When Rod heard himself think that ancient and useless protest he had a sudden vision of the Deacon's kindly, cynical smile. He heard his dry drawl: Fair? You expected this to be *fair*, son? This is not a game. I tried to tell you that you were a city boy, too soft and stupid for this. You would not listen.

He felt a gust of anger at his instructor; it drove fear out of his mind. Jimmy was right; the Deacon would eat his own grandmother! A cold, heartless fish!

All right, what would the Deacon do?

Again he heard his teacher's voice inside his head, an answer Matson had once given to a question put by another classmate: "There wasn't anything I could do, so I took a nap."

Rod squirmed around, rested his hand on "Colonel Bowie" and tried to take a nap. The unholy chorus made it almost impossible, but he did decide that the stobor in his tree—or was it the next tree?—did not seem to be coming closer. Not that it could come much closer without breathing on his neck, but at least it did not seem disposed to attack.

After a long time he fell into restless sleep, sleep that was no improvement, for he dreamed that he had a ring of sobbing, ululating stobor around him, staring at him, waiting for him to move. But he was trussed up tight and could not move.

The worst of it was that every time he turned his head to see what a stobor looked like it would fade back into the dark, giving him just a hint of red eyes, long teeth.

He woke with an icy shock, tried to sit up, found himself restrained by his chest strap, forced himself to lie back. What was it? What had happened?

In his suddenly-awakened state it took time to realize what had happened: the noise had stopped. He could not hear the cry of a single stobor, near or far. Rod found it more disturbing than their clamor, since a noisy stobor advertised its location whereas a silent one could be anywhere—why, the nearest one could now be sitting on the branch behind his head. He twisted his head around, pulled the insect netting off his face to see better. But it was too dark; stobor might be queued up three abreast for all he could tell.

Nevertheless the silence was a great relief. Rod felt himself relax as he listened to the other night sounds, noises that seemed almost friendly after that devils' choir. He decided that it must be almost morning and that he would do well to stay awake.

Presently he was asleep.

He awoke with the certainty that someone was looking at him. When he realized where he was and that it was still dark, he decided that it was a dream. He stirred, looked around, and tried to go back to sleep.

Something *was* looking at him!

His eyes, made sensitive by darkness, saw the thing as a vague shape on the branch at his foot. Black on black, he could not make out its outline—but two faintly luminous eyes stared unwinkingly back into his.

"—nothing I could do, so I took a nap." Rod did not take a nap. For a time measured in eons he and the thing in the tree locked eyes. Rod tightened his grip on his knife and held still, tried to quell the noise of his pounding heart, tried to figure out how he could fight back from a hammock. The beast did not move, made no sound; it simply stared and seemed prepared to do it all night.

When the ordeal had gone on so long that Rod felt a mounting impulse to shout and get it over, the creature moved with light scratching sounds toward the trunk and was gone. Rod could feel the branch shift; he judged that the beast must weigh as much as he did.

Again he resolved to stay awake. Wasn't it getting less dark? He tried to tell himself so, but he still could not see his own fingers. He decided to count to ten thousand and bring on the dawn.

Something large went down the tree very fast, followed at once by another, and still a third. They did not stop at Rod's bedroom but went

straight down the trunk. Rod put his knife back and muttered, “Noisy neighbors! You’d think this was Emigrants’ Gap.” He waited but the frantic procession never came back.

He was awakened by sunlight in his face. It made him sneeze; he tried to sit up, was caught by his safety belt, became wide awake and regretted it. His nose was stopped up, his eyes burned, his mouth tasted like a ditch, his teeth were slimy, and his back ached. When he moved to ease it he found that his legs ached, too—and his arms—and his head. His neck refused to turn to the right.

Nevertheless he felt happy that the long night was gone. His surroundings were no longer terrifying, but almost idyllic. So high up that he could not see the ground he was still well below the roof of the jungle and could not see sky; he floated in a leafy cloud. The morning ray that brushed his face was alone, so thoroughly did trees shut out the sky.

This reminded him that he had to mark the direction of sunrise. Hmm…not too simple. Would he be able to see the sun from the floor of the jungle? Maybe he should climb down quickly, get out in the open, and mark the direction while the sun was still low. But he noticed that the shaft which had wakened him was framed by a limb notch of another forest giant about fifteen meters away. Very well, that tree was “east” of his tree; he could line them up again when he reached the ground.

Getting out of his hammock was almost as hard as getting in; sore muscles resented the effort. At last he was balanced precariously on one limb. He crawled to the trunk, pulled himself painfully erect and, steadied by the trunk, took half-hearted setting-up exercises to work the knots out. Everything loosened up but his neck, which still had a crick like a toothache.

He ate and drank sitting on the limb with his back to the trunk. He kept no special lookout, rationalizing that night feeders would be bedded down and day feeders would hardly be prowling the tree tops—not big ones, anyway; they would be on the ground, stalking herbivores. The truth was that his green hide-away looked too peaceful to be dangerous.

He continued to sit after he finished eating, considered drinking more of his precious water, even considered crawling back into his hammock. Despite the longest night he had ever had he was bone tired and the day was already hot and sleepy and humid; why not stretch out? His only purpose was to survive; how better than by sleeping and thereby saving food and water?

He might have done so had he known what time it was. His watch told him that it was five minutes before twelve, but he could not make up his mind whether that was noon on Sunday or midnight coming into Monday. He was sure that this planet spun much more slowly than did

Mother Earth; the night before had been at least as long as a full Earth day.

Therefore the test had been going on at least twenty six hours and possibly thirty-eight—and recall could be any time after forty-eight hours. Why, it might be today, before sunset, and here he was in fine shape, still alive, still with food and water he could trust.

He felt good about it. What did a stobor have that a man did not have more of and better? Aside from a loud voice, he added.

But the exit gate might be as much as twenty kilometers "east" of where he had come in; therefore it behooved him to reach quickly a point ten kilometers east of where he had come in; he would lay money that that would land him within a kilometer or two of the exit. Move along, hole up, and wait—why, he might sleep at home tonight, after a hot bath!

He started unlashing his hammock while reminding himself that he must keep track of hours between sunrise and sunset today in order to estimate the length of the local day. Then he thought no more about it as he had trouble folding the hammock. It had to be packed carefully to fit into a pocket of his vest pack. The filmy stuff should have been spread on a table, but where he was the largest, flattest area was the palm of his hand.

But he got it done, lumpy but packed, and started down. He paused on the lowest branch, looked around. The oversized and hungry thing that had chased him up the tree did not seem to be around, but the undergrowth was too dense for him to be sure. He made a note that he must, all day long and every day, keep a climbable tree in mind not too far away; a few seconds woolgathering might use up his luck.

Okay, now for orientation—Let's see, there was the tree he had used to mark "east." Or was it? Could it be that one over there? He realized that he did not know and swore at himself for not checking it by compass. The truth was that he had forgotten that he was carrying a compass. He got it out now, but it told him nothing, since east by compass bore no necessary relation to direction of sunrise on this planet. The rays of the primary did not penetrate where he was; the forest was bathed by a dim religious light unmarked by shadows.

Well, the clearing could not be far away. He would just have to check. He descended by climbing spurs, dropped to spongy ground, and headed the way it should be. He counted his paces while keeping an eye peeled for hostiles.

One hundred paces later he turned back, retracing his own spoor. He found "his" tree; this time he examined it. There was where he had come down; he could see his prints. Which side had he gone up? There should be spur marks.

He found them…and was amazed at his own feat; they started high as his head. "I must have hit that trunk like a cat!" But it showed the

direction from which he had come; five minutes later he was at the edge of the open country he had crossed the day before.

The sun made shadows here, which straightened him out and he checked by compass. By luck, east was “east” and he need only follow his compass. It took him back into the forest.

He traveled standing up. The belly sneak which he had used the day before was not needed here; he depended on moving noiselessly, using cover, and keeping an eye out behind as well as in front. He zigzagged in order to stay close to trees neither too big nor too small but corrected his course frequently by compass.

One part of his mind counted paces. At fifteen hundred broken-country steps to a kilometer Rod figured that fifteen thousand should bring him to his best-guess location for the exit gate, where he planned to set up housekeeping until recall.

But, even with part of his mind counting paces and watching a compass and a much larger part watching for carnivores, snakes, and other hazards, Rod still could enjoy the day and place. He was over his jitters of the night before, feeling good and rather cocky. Even though he tried to be fully alert, the place did not feel dangerous now—stobor or no stobor.

It was, he decided, jungle of semi-rainforest type, not dense enough to require chopping one’s way. It was interlaced with game paths but he avoided these on the assumption that carnivores might lie waiting for lunch to come down the path—Rod had no wish to volunteer.

The place seemed thick with game, mostly of antelope type in many sizes and shapes. They were hard to spot; they faded into the bush with natural camouflage, but the glimpses he got convinced him that they were plentiful. He avoided them as he was not hunting and was aware that even a vegetarian could be dangerous with hooves and horns in self or herd defense.

The world above was inhabited, too, with birds and climbers. He spotted families of what looked like monkeys and speculated that this world would probably have developed its own race of humanoids. He wondered again what planet it was? Terrestrial to several decimal places it certainly seemed to be—except for the inconveniently long day—and probably one just opened, or it would be swarming with colonists. It would be a premium planet certainly; that clearing he had come through yesterday would make good farm land once it was burned off. Maybe he would come back some day and help clean out the stobor.

In the meantime he watched where he put his hands and feet, never walked under a low branch without checking it, and tried to make his eyes and ears as efficient as a rabbit’s. He understood now what his sister had meant about how being unarmed makes a person careful, and realized also how little chance he would have to use a gun if he let

himself be surprised.

It was this hyperacuteness that made him decide that he was being stalked.

At first it was just uneasiness, then it became a conviction. Several times he waited by a tree, stood frozen and listened; twice he did a sneak through bushes and doubled back on his tracks. But whatever it was seemed as good as he was at silent movement and taking cover and (he had to admit) a notch better.

He thought about taking to the trees and outwaiting it. But his wish to reach his objective outweighed his caution; he convinced himself that he would be safer if he pushed on. He continued to pay special attention to his rear, but after a while he decided that he was no longer being followed.

When he had covered, by his estimate, four kilometers, he began to smell water. He came to a ravine which sliced across his route. Game tracks led him to think it might lead down to a watering place, just the sort of danger area he wished to avoid, so Rod crossed quickly and went down the shoulder of the ravine instead. It led to a bank overlooking water; he could hear the stream before he reached it.

He took to the bushes and moved on his belly to a point where he could peer out from cover. He was about ten meters higher than the water. The ground dropped off on his right as well as in front; there the ravine joined the stream and an eddy pool formed the watering place he had expected. No animals were in sight but there was plenty of sign; a mud flat was chewed with hoof marks.

But he had no intention of drinking where it was easy; would be too easy to die there. What troubled him was that he must cross the stream to reach the probable recall area. It was a small river or wide brook, not too wide to swim, probably not too deep to wade if he picked his spot. But he would not do either one unless forced—and not then without testing the water by chucking a lure into it…a freshly killed animal. The streams near his home were safe, but a tropical stream must be assumed to have local versions of alligator, piranha, or even worse.

The stream was too wide to cross through the tree tops. He lay still and considered the problem, then decided that he would work his way upstream and hope that it would narrow, or split into two smaller streams which he could tackle one at a time.

It was the last thing he thought about for some time.

When Rod regained consciousness it was quickly; a jackal-like creature was sniffing at him. Rod lashed out with one hand and reached for his knife with the other. The dog brute backed away, snarling, then disappeared in the leaves.

His knife was gone! The realization brought him groggily alert; he sat up. It made his head swim and hurt. He felt it and his fingers came

away bloody. Further gingerly investigation showed a big and very tender swelling on the back of his skull, hair matted with blood, and failed to tell him whether or not his skull was fractured. He gave no thanks that he had been left alive; he was sure that the blow had been intended to kill.

But not only his knife was gone. He was naked, save for his shorts. Gone were his precious water, his vest pack with rations and a dozen other invaluable articles—his antibiotics, his salt, his compass, his climbers, his matches, his hammock…everything.

His first feeling of sick dismay was replaced by anger. Losing food and gear was no more than to be expected, since he had been such a fool as to forget his rear while he looked at the stream—but taking the watch his father had given him, that was stealing; he would make somebody pay for that!

His anger made him feel better. It was not until then that he noticed that the bandage on his left shin was undisturbed.

He felt it. Sure enough! Whoever it was who had hijacked him had not considered a bandage worth stealing; Rod unwrapped it and cradled Lady Macbeth in his hand.

Somebody was going to be sorry.

4

Savage

ROD WALKER WAS CROUCHING ON A TREE LIMB. He had not moved for two hours, he might not move for as long a time. In a clearing near him a small herd of yearling bachelor buck were cropping grass; if one came close enough Rod intended to dine on buck. He was very hungry.

He was thirsty, too, not having drunk that day. Besides that, he was slightly feverish. Three long, imperfectly healed scratches on his left arm accounted for the fever, but Rod paid fever and scratches no attention—he was alive; he planned to stay alive.

A buck moved closer to him; Rod became quiveringly alert. But the little buck tossed his head, looked at the branch, and moved away. He did not appear to see Rod; perhaps his mother had taught him to be careful of overhanging branches—or perhaps a hundred thousand generations of harsh survival had printed it in his genes.

Rod swore under his breath and lay still. One of them was bound to make a mistake eventually; then he would eat. It had been days since he had thought about anything but food…food and how to keep his skin intact, how to drink without laying himself open to ambush, how to sleep without waking up in a fellow-denizen's belly.

The healing wounds on his arm marked how expensive his tuition had been. He had let himself get too far from a tree once too often, had not even had time to draw his knife. Instead he had made an impossible leap and had chinned himself with the wounded arm. The thing that had clawed him he believed to be the same sort as the creature that had treed him the day of his arrival; furthermore he believed it to be a lion. He had a theory about that, but had not yet been able to act on it.

He was gaunt almost to emaciation and had lost track of time. He realized that the time limit of the survival test had probably—almost certainly—passed, but he did not know how long he had lain in the crotch of a tree, waiting for his arm to heal, nor exactly how long it had been since he had come down, forced by thirst and hunger. He supposed that the recall signal had probably been given during one of his unconscious periods, but he did not worry nor even think about it. He was no longer interested in survival tests; he was interested in survival.

Despite his weakened condition his chances were better now than when he had arrived. He was becoming sophisticated, no longer afraid of things he had been afraid of, most acutely wary of others which had seemed harmless. The creatures with the ungodly voices which he had

dubbed “stobor” no longer fretted him; he had seen one, had disturbed it by accident in daylight and it had given voice. It was not as big as his hand, and reminded him of a horned lizard except that it had the habits of a tree toad. Its one talent was its voice; it could blow up a bladder at its neck to three times its own size, then give out with that amazing, frightening sob.

But that was all it could do.

Rod had guessed that it was a love call, then had filed the matter. He still called them “stobor.”

He had learned about a forest vine much like a morning glory, but its leaves carried a sting worse than that of a nettle, toxic and producing numbness. Another vine had large grape-like fruits, deliciously tempting and pleasant to the palate; Rod had learned the hard way that they were a powerful purgative.

He knew, from his own narrow brushes and from kills left half-eaten on the ground, that there were carnivores around even though he had never had a good look at one. So far as he knew there were no carnivorous tree-climbers large enough to tackle a man, but he could not be certain; he slept with one eye open.

The behavior of this herd caused him to suspect that there must be carnivores that hunted as he was now hunting, even though he had had the good fortune not to tangle with one. The little buck had wandered all over the clearing, passed close by lesser trees, yet no one of them had grazed under the tree Rod was in.

Steady, boy…here comes one. Rod felt the grip of “Lady Macbeth,” got ready to drop onto the graceful little creature as it passed under. But five meters away it hesitated, seemed to realize that it was straying from its mates, and started to turn.

Rod let fly.

He could hear the meaty *tunk!* as blade bit into muscle; he could see the hilt firm against the shoulder of the buck. He dropped to the ground, hit running and moved in to finish the kill.

The buck whipped its head up, turned and fled. Rod dived, did not touch it. When he rolled to his feet the clearing was empty. His mind was filled with bitter thoughts; he had promised himself never to throw his knife when there was any possibility of not being able to recover it, but he did not let regrets slow him; he got to work on the tracking problem.

Rod had been taught the first law of hunting sportsmanship, that a wounded animal must always be tracked down and finished, not left to suffer and die slowly. But there was no trace of “sportsmanship” in his present conduct; he undertook to track the buck because he intended to eat it, and—much more urgently—because he had to recover that knife in order to stay alive.

The buck had not bled at once and its tracks were mixed up with hundreds of other tracks. Rod returned three times to the clearing and started over before he picked up the first blood spoor. After that it was easier but he was far behind now and the stampeded buck moved much faster than he could track. His quarry stayed with the herd until it stopped in a new pasture a half kilometer away. Rod stopped still in cover and looked them over. His quarry did not seem to be among them.

But blood sign led in among them; he followed it and they stampeded again. He had trouble picking it up; when he did he found that it led into brush instead of following the herd. This made it easier and harder—easier because he no longer had to sort one spoor from many, harder because pushing through the brush was hard in itself and much more dangerous, since he must never forget that he himself was hunted as well as hunter, and lastly because the signs were so much harder to spot there. But it cheered him up, knowing that only a weakened animal would leave the herd and try to hide. He expected to find it down before long.

But the beast did not drop; it seemed to have a will to live as strong as his own. He followed it endlessly and was beginning to wonder what he would do if it grew dark before the buck gave up. He *had* to have that knife.

He suddenly saw that there were two spoors.

Something had stepped beside a fresh, split-hooved track of the little antelope; something had stepped on a drop of blood. Quivering, his subconscious "bush radar" at full power, Rod moved silently forward. He found new marks again…a man!

The print of a shod human foot—and so wild had he become that it gave him no feeling of relief; it made him more wary than ever.

Twenty minutes later he found them, the human and the buck. The buck was down, having died or perhaps been finished off by the second stalker. The human, whom Rod judged to be a boy somewhat younger and smaller than himself, was kneeling over it, slicing its belly open. Rod faded back into the bush. From there he watched and thought. The other hunter seemed much preoccupied with the kill…and that tree hung over the place where the butchering was going on—

A few minutes later Rod was again on a branch, without a knife but with a long thorn held in his teeth. He looked down, saw that his rival was almost under him, and transferred the thorn to his right hand. Then he waited.

The hunter below him laid the knife aside and bent to turn the carcass. Rod dropped.

He felt body armor which had been concealed by his victim's shirt. Instantly he transferred his attention to the bare neck, pushing the thorn firmly against vertebrae. "Hold still or you've had it!"

The body under him suddenly quit struggling.

"That's better," Rod said approvingly. "Cry pax?"

No answer. Rod jabbed the thorn again. "I'm not playing games," he said harshly. "I'm giving you one chance stay alive. Cry pax and mean it, and well both eat. Give me any trouble and you'll never eat again. It doesn't make the least difference."

There was a moments hesitation, then a muffled voice said, "Pax."

Keeping the thorn pressed against his prisoner's neck, Rod reached out for the knife which had been used to gut the buck. It was, he saw, his own Lady Macbeth. He sheathed it, felt around under the body he rested on, found another where he expected it, pulled it and kept in his hand. He chucked away the thorn and stood up. "You can get up."

The youngster got up and faced him sullenly. "Give me my knife."

"Later…if you are a good boy."

"I said 'Pax.'"

"So you did. Turn around, I want to make sure you don't have a gun on you."

"I left—I've nothing but my knife. Give it to me."

"Left it where?"

The kid did not answer. Rod said, "Okay, turn around," and threatened with the borrowed knife. He was obeyed. Rod quickly patted all the likely hiding places, confirmed that the youngster was wearing armor under clothes and over the entire torso. Rod himself was dressed only in tan, scratches, torn and filthy shorts, and a few scars. "Don't you find that junk pretty hot this weather?" he asked cheerfully. "Okay, you can turn around. Keep your distance."

The youngster turned around, still with a very sour expression. "What's your name, bud?"

"Uh, Jack."

"Jack what? Mine's Rod Walker."

"Jack Daudet."

"What school, Jack?"

"Ponce de Leon Institute."

"Mine's Patrick Henry High School."

"*Matson's* class?"

"The Deacon himself."

"I've heard of him." Jack seemed impressed.

"Who hasn't? Look, let's quit jawing; we'll have the whole county around our ears. Let's eat. You keep watch that way; I'll keep watch behind you."

“Then give me my knife. I need it to eat.”

“Not so fast. I’ll cut you off a hunk or two. Special Waldorf service.”

Rod continued the incision Jack had started, carried it on up and laid the hide back from the right shoulder, hacked off a couple of large chunks of lean. He tossed one to Jack, hunkered down and gnawed his own piece while keeping sharp lookout. “You keeping your eyes peeled?” he asked.

“Sure.”

Rod tore off a rubbery mouthful of warm meat. “Jack, how did they let a runt like you take the test? You aren’t old enough.”

“I’ll bet I’m as old as you are!”

“I doubt it.”

“Well… I’m qualified.”

“You don’t look it.”

“I’m *here*, I’m alive.”

Rod grinned. “You’ve made your point. I’ll shut up.” Once his portion was resting comfortably inside, Rod got up, split the skull and dug out the brains. “Want a handful?”

“Sure.”

Rod passed over a fair division of the dessert. Jack accepted it, hesitated, then blurted out, “Want some salt?”

“*Salt!* You’ve got *salt?*”

Jack appeared to regret the indiscretion. “Some. Go easy on it.”

Rod held out his handful. “Put some on. Whatever you can spare.”

Jack produced a pocket shaker from between shirt and armor, sprinkled a little on Rod’s portion, then shrugged and made it liberal. “Didn’t you bring salt along?”

“Me?” Rod answered, tearing his eyes from the mouthwatering sight. “Oh, sure! But—Well, I had an accident.” He decided that there was no use admitting that he had been caught off guard.

Jack put the shaker firmly out of sight. They munched quietly, each watching half their surroundings. After a while Rod said softly, “Jackal behind you, Jack.”

“Nothing else?”

“No. But it’s time we whacked up the meat and got out of here; we’re attracting attention. How much can you use?”

“Uh, a haunch and a chunk of liver. I can’t carry any more.”

“And you can’t eat more before it spoils, anyway.” Rod started butchering the hind quarters. He cut a slice of hide from the belly, used

it to sling his share around his neck. “Well, so long, kid. Here’s your knife. Thanks for the salt.”

“Oh, that’s all right.”

“Tasted mighty good. Well, keep your eyes open.”

“Same to you. Good luck.”

Rod stood still. Then he said almost reluctantly, “Uh, Jack, you wouldn’t want to team up, would you?” He regretted it as soon as he said it, remembering how easily he had surprised the kid.

Jack chewed a lip. “Well… I don’t know.”

Rod felt affronted. “What’s the matter? Afraid of me?” Didn’t the kid see that Rod was doing him a favor?

“Oh, no! You’re all right, I guess.”

Rod had an unpleasant suspicion. “You think I’m trying to get a share of your salt, don’t you?”

“Huh? Not at all. Look, I’ll divvy some salt with you.”

“I wouldn’t touch it! I just thought—” Rod stopped. He had been thinking that they had both missed recall; it looked like a long pull.

“I didn’t mean to make you mad, Rod. You’re right. We ought to team.”

“Don’t put yourself out! I can get along.”

“I’ll bet you can. But let’s team up. Is it a deal?”

“Well… Shake.”

Once the contract was made Rod assumed leadership. There was no discussion; he simply did so and Jack let it stand. “You lead off,” Rod ordered, “and I’ll cover our rear.”

“Okay. Where are we heading?”

“That high ground downstream. There are good trees there, better for all night than around here. I want us to have time to settle in before dark—so a quick sneak and no talking.”

Jack hesitated. “Okay. Are you dead set on spending the night in a tree?”

Rod curled his lip. “Want to spend it on the ground? How did you stay alive this long?”

“I spent a couple of nights in trees,” Jack answered mildly. “But I’ve got a better place now, maybe.”

“Huh? What sort?”

“A sort of a cave.”

Rod thought about it. Caves could be death traps. But the prospect of being able to stretch out swayed him. “Won’t hurt to look, if it’s not too far.”

“It’s not far.”

5
The Nova

JACK'S HIDEAWAY WAS IN A BLUFF OVERLOOKING THE STREAM by which Rod had been robbed. At this point the bluffs walled a pocket valley and the stream meandered between low banks cut in an alluvial field between the bluffs. The cave was formed by an overhang of limestone which roofed a room water-carved from shale in one bluff. The wall below it was too sheer to climb; the overhanging limestone protected it above and the stream curved in sharply almost to the foot of the bluff. The only way to reach it was to descend the bluff farther upstream to the field edging the creek, then make a climbing traverse of the shale bank where it was somewhat less steep just upstream of the cave.

They slanted cautiously up the shale, squeezed under an overhang at the top, and stepped out on a hard slaty floor. The room was open on one side and fairly long and deep, but it squeezed in to a waist-high crawl space; only at the edge was there room to stand up. Jack grabbed some gravel, threw it into the dark hole, waited with knife ready. "Nobody home, I guess." They dropped to hands and knees, crawled inside. "How do you like it?"

"It's swell…provided we stand watches. Something could come up the way we did. You've been lucky."

"Maybe." Jack felt around in the gloom, dragged out dry branches of thorn bush, blocked the pathway, jamming them under the overhang. "That's my alarm."

"It wouldn't stop anything that got a whiff of you and really wanted to come in."

"No. But I would wake up and let it have some rocks in the face. I keep a stack over there. I've got a couple of scare-flares, too."

"I thought—Didn't you say you had a gun?"

"I didn't say, but I do. But I don't believe in shooting when you can't see."

"It looks all right. In fact it looks good, I guess I did myself a favor when I teamed with you." Rod looked around. "You've had a *fire!*"

"I've risked it a couple of times, in daylight. I get so tired of raw meat."

Rod sighed deeply. "I know. Say, do you suppose?"

"It's almost dark. I've never lighted one when it could show. How about roast liver for breakfast, instead? With salt?"

Rod's mouth watered. "You're right, Jack. I do want to get a drink before it is too dark, though. How about coming along and we cover each other?"

"No need. There's a skin back there. Help yourself."

Rod congratulated himself on having teamed with a perfect housekeeper. The skin was of a small animal, not identifiable when distended with water. Jack had scraped the hide but it was uncured and decidedly unsavory. Rod was not aware that the water tasted bad; he drank deeply, wiped his mouth with his hand and felt at peace.

They did not sleep at once, but sat in the dark and compared notes. Jack's class had come through one day earlier, but with the same instructions. Jack agreed that recall was long overdue.

"I suppose I missed it while I was off my head," Rod commented. "I don't know how long I was foggy… I guess I didn't miss dying by much."

"That's not it, Rod."

"Why not?"

"I've been okay and keeping track of the time. There never was any recall."

"You're sure?"

"How could I miss? The siren can be heard for twenty kilometers, they use a smoke flare by day and a searchlight at night, and the law says they have to keep it up at least a week unless everybody returns… which certainly did not happen this time."

"Maybe we are out of range. Matter of fact—well, I don't know about you, but I'm lost. I admit it."

"I'm not. I'm about four kilometers from where they let my class through; I could show you the spot. Rod, let's face it; something has gone wrong. There is no way of telling how long we are going to be here." Jack added quietly, "That's why I thought it was a good idea to team."

Rod chewed it over, decided it was time to haul out his theory. "Me, too."

"Yes. Solo is actually safer, for a few days. But if we are stuck here indefinitely, then—"

"Not what I meant, Jack."

"Huh?"

"Do you know what planet this is?"

"No. I've thought about it, of course. It has to be one of the new list and it is compatible with—"

"I *know* what one it is."

"Huh? Which one?"

"It's Earth. Terra herself."

There was a long silence. At last Jack said, "Rod, are you all right? Are you still feverish?"

"I'm fine, now that I've got a full belly and a big drink of water. Look, Jack, I know it sounds silly, but you just listen and I'll add it up. We're on Earth and I think I know about where, too. I don't think they meant to sound recall; they meant us to figure out where we are…and walk out. It's a twist Deacon Matson would love."

"But—"

"Keep quiet, can't you? Yapping like a girl. Terrestrial planet, right?"

"Yes, but—"

"Stow it and let me talk. G-type star. Planetary rotation same as Earth."

"But it's not!"

"I made the same mistake. The first night I thought was a week long. But the truth was I was scared out of my skin and that made it seem endless. Now I know better. The rotation matches."

"No, it doesn't. My watch shows it to be about twenty-six hours."

"You had better have your watch fixed when we get back. You banged it against a tree or something."

"But—Oh, go ahead. Keep talking; it's your tape."

"You'll see. Flora compatible. Fauna compatible. I know how they did it and why and where they put us. It's an economy measure."

"A what?"

"Economy. Too many people complaining about school taxes being too high. Of course, keeping an interstellar gate open is expensive and uranium doesn't grow on trees. I see their point. But Deacon Matson says it is false economy. He says, sure, it's expensive—but that the only thing more expensive than a properly trained explorer or pioneer leader is an improperly trained dead one.

"He told us after class one day," Rod went on, "that the penny-pinchers wanted to run the practices and tests in selected areas on Earth, but the Deacon claims that the essence of survival in the Outlands is the skill to cope with the unknown. He said that if tests were held on Earth, the candidates would just study up on terrestrial environments. He said any Boy Scout could learn the six basic Earth environments and how to beat them out of books…but that it was criminal to call that survival training and then dump a man in an un-Earthly environment on his first professional assignment. He said that it was as ridiculous as just teaching a kid to play chess and then send him

out to fight a duel."

"He's right," Jack answered. "Commander Benboe talks the same way."

"Sure he's right. He swore that if they went ahead with this policy this would be the last year he would teach. But they pulled a gimmick on him."

"How?"

"It's a good one. What the Deacon forgot is that any environment is as unknown as any other if you don't have the slightest idea where you are. So they rigged it so that we could not know. First they shot us to Luna; the Moon gates are always open and that doesn't cost anything extra. Of course that made us think we were in for a long jump. Besides, it confused us; we wouldn't know we were being dumped back into the gravity field we had left—for that was what they did next; they shoved us back on Earth. Where? Africa, I'd say. I think they used the Luna Link to jump us to Witwatersrand Gate outside Johannesburg and there they were all set with a matched-in temporary link to drop us into the bush. Tshaka Memorial Park or some other primitive preserve, on a guess. Everything matches. A wide variety of antelope-type game, carnivores to feed on them—I've seen a couple of lions and—"

"You *have?*"

"Well, they will do for lions until I get a chance to skin one. But they threw in other dodges to confuse us, too. The sky would give the show away, particularly if we got a look at Luna. So they've hung an overcast over us. You can bet there are cloud generators not far away. Then they threw us one more curve. Were you warned against 'stobor'?"

"Yes."

"See any?"

"Well, I'm not sure what stobor are."

"Neither am I. Nor any of us, I'll bet. 'Stobor' is the bogeyman, chucked in to keep our pretty little heads busy. There aren't any 'stobor' on Terra so naturally we must be somewhere else. Even a suspicious character like me would be misled by that. In fact, I was. I even picked out something I didn't recognize and called it that, just as they meant me to do."

"You make it sound logical, Rod."

"Because it *is* logical. Once you realize that this is Earth—" He patted the floor of the cave. "—but that they have been trying to keep us from knowing it, everything falls into place. Now here is what we do. I was going to tackle it alone, as soon as I could—I haven't been able to move around much on account of this bad arm—but I decided to take you along, before you got hurt. Here's my plan. I think this is Africa, but it might be South America, or anywhere in the tropics. It

does not matter, because we simply follow this creek downstream, keeping our eyes open because there really are hazards; you can get just as dead here as in the Outlands. It may take a week, or a month, but one day well come to a bridge. We'll follow the road it serves until somebody happens along. Once in town we'll check in with the authorities and get them to flip us home…and we get our solo test certificates. Simple."

"You make it sound too simple," Jack said slowly.

"Oh, we'll have our troubles. But we can do it, now that we know what to do. I didn't want to bring this up before, but do you have salt enough to cure a few kilos of meat? If we did not have to hunt every day, we could travel faster. Or maybe you brought some Kwik-Kure?"

"I did, but—"

"Good!"

"Wait a minute, Rod. That won't do."

"Huh? We're a team, aren't we?"

"Take it easy. Look, Rod, everything you said is logical, but—"

"No 'buts' about it."

"It's logical…but it's all *wrong!*"

"Huh? Now, listen, Jack—"

"*You* listen. You've done all the talking so far."

"But—Well, all right, say your say."

"You said that the sky would give it away, so they threw an overcast over the area."

"Yes. That's what they must have done, nights at least. They wouldn't risk natural weather; it might give the show away."

"What I'm trying to tell you is that it *did* give the show away. It hasn't been overcast every night, though maybe you were in deep forest and missed the few times it has been clear. But I've seen the night sky, Rod. I've seen stars."

"So? Well?"

"They aren't *our* stars, Rod. I'm sorry."

Rod chewed his lip. "You probably don't know southern constellations very well?" he suggested.

"I knew the Southern Cross before I could read. These aren't our stars, Rod; I know. There is a pentagon of bright stars above where the sun sets; there is nothing like that to be seen from Earth. And besides, anybody would recognize Luna, if it was there."

Rod tried to remember what phase the Moon should be in. He gave up, as he had only a vague notion of elapsed time. "Maybe the Moon was down?"

“Not a chance. I didn’t see our Moon, Rod, but I saw *moons*…two of them, little ones and moving fast, like the moons of Mars.”

“You don’t mean this is *Mars?*” Rod said scornfully.

“Think I’m crazy? Anyhow, the stars from Mars are exactly like the stars from Earth. Rod, what are we jawing about? It was beginning to clear when the sun went down; let’s crawl out and have a look. Maybe you’ll believe your eyes.”

Rod shut up and followed Jack. From inside nothing was visible but dark trees across the stream, but from the edge of the shelf part of the sky could be seen. Rod looked up and blinked.

“Mind the edge,” Jack warned softly.

Rod did not answer. Framed by the ledge above him and by tree tops across the stream was a pattern of six stars, a lopsided pentagon with a star in its center. The six stars were as bright and unmistakable as the seven stars of Earth’s Big Dipper…nor did it take a degree in astrography to know that this constellation had never been seen from Terra.

Rod stared while the hard convictions he had formed fell in ruins. He felt lost and alone. The trees across the way seemed frightening. He turned to Jack, his cocky sophistication gone. “You’ve convinced me,” he said dully. “What do we do now?”

Jack did not answer.

“Well?” Rod insisted. “No good standing here.”

“Rod,” Jack answered, “that star in the middle of the Pentagon—it wasn’t there before.”

“Huh? You probably don’t remember.”

“No, no, I’m sure! Rod, you know what? We’re seeing a *nova*.”

Rod was unable to arouse the pure joy of scientific discovery; his mind was muddled with reorganizing his personal universe. A mere stellar explosion meant nothing. “Probably one of your moonlets.”

“Not a chance. The moons are big enough to show disks. It’s a nova; it has to be. What amazing luck to see one!”

“I don’t see anything lucky about it,” Rod answered moodily. “It doesn’t mean anything to us. It’s probably a hundred light-years away, maybe more.”

“Yes, but doesn’t it thrill you?”

“No.” He stooped down and went inside. Jack took another look, then followed.

There was silence, moody on Rod’s part. At last Jack said, “Think I’ll turn in.”

“I just can’t see,” Rod answered irrelevantly, “how I could be so wrong. It was a logical certainty.”

“Forget it,” Jack advised. “My analytics instructor says that all logic is mere tautology. She says it is impossible to learn anything through logic that you did not already know.”

“Then what use is logic?” Rod demanded.

“Ask me an easy one. Look, partner, I’m dead for sleep; I want to turn in.”

“All right. But, Jack, if this isn’t Africa—and I’ve got to admit it isn’t—what do we do? They’ve gone off and *left* us.”

“Do? We do what we’ve been doing. Eat, sleep, stay alive. This is a listed planet; if we just keep breathing, someday somebody will show up. It might be just a power breakdown; they may pick us tomorrow.”

“In that case, then—”

“In that case, let’s shut up and go to sleep.”

6

“I Think He Is Dead”

ROD WAS AWAKENED BY HEAVENLY ODORS. He rolled over, blinked at light streaming under the overhang, managed by great effort to put himself back into the matrix of the day before. Jack, he saw, was squatting by a tiny fire on the edge of the shelf; the wonderful fragrance came from toasting liver.

Rod got to his knees, discovering that he was slightly stiff from having fought dream stobor in his sleep. These nightmare stobor were bug-eyed monsters fit for a planet suddenly strange and threatening. Nevertheless he had had a fine night’s sleep and his spirits could not be daunted in the presence of the tantalizing aroma drifting in.

Jack looked up. “I thought you were going to sleep all day. Brush your teeth, comb your hair, take a quick shower, and get on out here. Breakfast is ready.” Jack looked him over again. “Better shave, too.”

Rod grinned and ran his hand over his chin. “You’re jealous of my manly beard, youngster. Wait a year or two and you’ll find out what a nuisance it is. Shaving, the common cold, and taxes…my old man says those are the three eternal problems the race is never going to lick.” Rod felt a twinge at the thought of his parents, a stirring of conscience that he had not thought of them in he could not remember how long. “Can I help, pal?”

“Sit down and grab the salt. This piece is for you.”

“Let’s split it.”

“Eat and don’t argue. I’ll fix me some.” Rod accepted the charred and smoky chunk, tossed it in his hands and blew on it. He looked around for salt. Jack Was slicing a second piece; Rod’s eyes passed over the operation—then whipped back.

The knife Jack was using was “Colonel Bowie.”

The realization was accompanied by action; Rod’s hand darted out and caught Jack’s wrist in an anger-hard grip. “You stole my knife!”

Jack did not move. “Rod…have you gone crazy?”

“You slugged me and stole my knife.”

Jack made no attempt to fight, nor even to struggle. “You aren’t awake yet, Rod. Your knife is on your belt. This is another knife… mine.”

Rod did not bother to look down. “The one I’m wearing is Lady Macbeth. I mean the knife you’re using, Colonel Bowie—*my* knife.”

“Let go my wrist.”

“Drop it!”

“Rod…you can probably make me drop this knife. You’re bigger and you’ve got the jump on me. But yesterday you teamed with me. You’re busting that team right now. If you don’t let go right away, the team is broken. Then you’ll have to kill me…because if you don’t, I’ll trail you. I’ll keep on trailing you until I find you asleep. Then you’ve had it.”

They faced each other across the little fire, eyes locked. Rod breathed hard and tried to think. The evidence was against Jack. But had this little runt tracked him, slugged him, stolen everything he had? It looked like it.

Yet it did not *feel* like it. He told himself that he could handle the kid if his story did not ring true. He let go Jack’s wrist. “All right,” he said angrily, “tell me how you got my knife.”

Jack went on slicing liver. “It’s not much of a story…and I don’t know that it is *your* knife. But it was not mine to start with—you’ve seen mine. I use this one as a kitchen knife. Its balance is wrong.”

“Colonel Bowie! Balanced wrong? That’s the best throwing knife you ever saw!”

“Do you want to hear this? I ran across this hombre in the bush, just as the jackals were getting to him. I don’t know what got him—stobor, maybe; he was pretty well clawed and half eaten. He wasn’t one of my class, for his face wasn’t marked and I could tell. He was carrying a Thunderbolt and—”

“Wait a minute. A Thunderbolt gun?”

“I said so, didn’t I? I guess he tried to use it and had no luck. Anyhow, I took what I could use—this knife and a couple of other things; I’ll show you. I left the Thunderbolt; the power pack was exhausted and it was junk.”

“Jack, look at me. You’re not lying?”

Jack shrugged. “I can take you to the spot. There might not be anything left of him, but the Thunderbolt ought to be there.”

Rod stuck out his hand. “I’m sorry. I jumped to conclusions.”

Jack looked at his hand, did not shake it. “I don’t think you are much of a team mate. We had better call it quits.” The knife flipped over, landed at Rod’s toes. “Take your toadsticker and be on your way.”

Rod did not pick up the knife. “Don’t get sore, Jack. I made an honest mistake.”

“It was a mistake, all right. You didn’t trust me and I’m not likely to trust you again. You can’t build a team on that.” Jack hesitated. “Finish your breakfast and shove off. It’s better that way.”

“Jack, I truly am sorry. I apologize. But it was a mistake anybody could make—you haven’t heard my side of the story.”

“You didn’t wait to hear my story!”

“So I was wrong, I *said* I was wrong.” Rod hurriedly told how he had been stripped of his survival gear. “—so naturally, when I saw Colonel Bowie, I assumed that you must have jumped me. That’s logical, isn’t it?” Jack did not answer; Rod persisted: “Well? Isn’t it?”

Jack said slowly, “You used ‘logic’ again. What you call ‘logic.’ Rod, you use the stuff the way some people use dope. Why don’t you use your head, instead?”

Rod flushed and kept still. Jack went on, “If I had swiped your knife, would I have let you see it? For that matter, would I have teamed with you?”

“No, I guess not. Jack, I jumped at a conclusion and lost my temper.”

“Commander Benboe says,” Jack answered bleakly, “that losing your temper and jumping at conclusions is a one-way ticket to the cemetery.”

Rod looked sheepish. “Deacon Matson talks the same way.”

“Maybe they’re right. So let’s not do it again, huh? Every dog gets one bite, but only one.”

Rod looked up, saw Jack’s dirty paw stuck out at him. “You mean we’re partners again?”

“Shake. I think we had better be; we don’t have much choice.” They solemnly shook hands. Then Rod picked up Colonel Bowie, looked at it longingly, and handed it hilt first to Jack.

“I guess it’s yours, after all.”

“Huh? Oh, no. I’m glad you’ve got it back.”

“No,” Rod insisted. “You came by it fair and square.”

“Don’t be silly, Rod. I’ve got ‘Bluebeard’; that’s the knife for me.”

“It’s yours. I’ve got Lady Macbeth.”

Jack frowned. “We’re partners, right?”

“Huh? Sure.”

“So. We share everything. Bluebeard belongs just as much to you as to me. And Colonel Bowie belongs to both of us. But you are used to it, so it’s best for the team for you to wear it. Does that appeal to your lopsided sense of logic?”

“Well…”

“So shut up and eat your breakfast. Shall I toast you another slice? That one is cold.”

Rod picked up the scorched chunk of liver, brushed dirt and ashes

from it. “This is all right.”

“Throw it in the stream and have a hot piece. Liver won’t keep anyhow.”

Comfortably stuffed, and warmed by companionship, Rod stretched out on the shelf after breakfast and stared at the sky. Jack put out the fire and tossed the remnants of their meal downstream. Something broke water and snapped at the liver even as it struck. Jack turned to Rod. “Well, what do we do today?”

“Mmm…what we’ve got on hand ought to be fit to eat tomorrow morning. We don’t need to make a kill today.”

“I hunt every second day, usually, since I found this place. Second-day meat is better than first, but by the third…phewy!”

“Sure. Well, what do you want to do?”

“Well, let’s see. First I’d like to buy a tall, thick chocolate malted milk—or maybe a fruit salad. Both. I’d eat those—”

“Stop it, you’re breaking my heart!”

“Then I’d have a hot bath and get all dressed up and flip out to Hollywood and see a couple of good shows. That superspectacle that Dirk Manleigh is starring in and then a good adventure show. After that I’d have another malted milk…strawberry, this time, and then—”

“*Shut up!*”

“You asked me what I wanted to do.”

“Yes, but I expected you to stick to possibilities.”

“Then why didn’t you say so? Is that ‘logical’? I thought you always used logic?”

“Say, lay off, will you? I apologized.”

“Yeah, you apologized,” Jack admitted darkly. “But I’ve got some mad I haven’t used up yet.”

“Well! Are you the sort of pal who keeps raking up the past?”

“Only when you least expect it. Seriously, Rod, I think we ought to hunt today.”

“But you agreed we didn’t need to. It’s wrong, and dangerous besides, to make a kill you don’t need.”

“I think we ought to hunt people.”

Rod pulled his ear. “Say that again.”

“We ought to spend the day hunting people.”

“Huh? Well, anything for fun I always say. What do we do when we find them? Scalp them, or just shout ‘Beaver!’?”

“Scalping is more definite. Rod, how long will we be here?”

“Huh? All we know is that something has gone seriously cockeyed with the recall schedule. You say we’ve been here three weeks. I would say it was longer but you have kept a notch calendar and I haven’t. Therefore…” He stopped.

“Therefore what?”

“Therefore nothing. They might have had some technical trouble, which they may clear up and recall us this morning. Deacon Matson and his fun-loving colleagues might have thought it was cute to double the period and not mention it. The Dalai Lama might have bombed the whiskers off the rest of the World and the Gates may be radioactive ruins. Or maybe the three-headed serpent men of the Lesser Magellanic Cloud have landed and have the situation well in hand—for them. When you haven’t data, guessing is illogical. We might be here forever.”

Jack nodded. “That’s my point.”

“Which point? We know we may be marooned; that’s obvious.”

“Rod, a two-man team is just right for a few weeks. But suppose this runs into months? Suppose one of us breaks a leg? Or even if we don’t, how long is that thorn-bush alarm going to work? We ought to wall off that path and make this spot accessible only by rope ladder, With somebody here all the time to let the ladder down. We ought to locate a salt lick and think about curing hides and things like that—that water skin I made is getting high already. For a long pull we ought to have at least four people.”

Rod scratched his gaunt ribs thoughtfully. “I know. I thought about it last night, after you jerked the rug out from under my optimistic theory. But I was waiting for you to bring it up.”

“Why?”

“This is your cave. You’ve got all the fancy equipment, a gun and pills and other stuff I haven’t seen. You’ve got salt. All I’ve got is a knife—two knives now, thanks to you. I’d look sweet suggesting that you share four ways.”

“We’re a team, Rod.”

“Mmm…yes. And we both figure the team would be strengthened with a couple of recruits. Well, how many people are there out there?” He gestured at the wall of green across the creek.

“My class put through seventeen boys and eleven girls. Commander Benboe told us there would be four classes in the same test area.”

“That’s more than the Deacon bothered to tell us. However, my class put through about twenty.”

Jack looked thoughtful. “Around a hundred people, probably.”

“Not counting casualties.”

“Not counting casualties. Maybe two-thirds boys, one-third girls.

Plenty of choice, if we can find them."

"No girls on this team, Jack."

"What have you got against girls?"

"Me? Nothing at all. Girls are swell on picnics, they are just right on long winter evenings. I'm one of the most enthusiastic supporters of the female race. But for a hitch like this, they are pure poison."

Jack did not say anything. Rod went on, "Use your head, brother. You get some pretty little darling on this team and we'll have more grief inside than stobor, or such, can give us from outside. Quarrels and petty jealousies and maybe a couple of boys knifing each other. It will be tough enough without that trouble."

"Well," Jack answered thoughtfully, "suppose the first one we locate is a girl? What are you going to do? Tip your hat and say, 'It's a fine day, ma'am. Now drop dead and don't bother me.'?"

Rod drew a pentagon in the ashes, put a star in the middle, then rubbed it out. "I don't know," he said slowly. "Let's hope we get our team working before we meet any. And let's hope they set up their own teams."

"I think we ought to have a policy."

"I'm clean out of policies. You would just accuse me of trying to be logical. Got any ideas about how to find anybody?"

"Maybe. Somebody has been hunting upstream from here."

"So? Know who it is?"

"I've seen him only at a distance. Nobody from my class. Half a head shorter than you are, light hair, pink skin—and a bad sunburn. Sound familiar?"

"Could be anybody," Rod answered, thinking fretfully that the description did sound familiar. "Shall we see if we can pick up some sign of him?"

"I can put him in your lap. But I'm not sure we want him."

"Why not? If he's lasted this long, he must be competent."

"Frankly, I don't see how he has. He's noisy when he moves and he has been living in one tree for the past week."

"Not necessarily bad technique."

"It is when you drop your bones and leavings out of the tree. It was jackals sniffing around that tipped me off to where he was living."

"Hmm…well, if we don't like him, we don't have to invite him."

"True."

Before they set out Jack dug around in the gloomy cave and produced a climbing line. "Rod, could this be yours?"

Rod looked it over. "It's just like the one I had. Why?"

“I got it the way I got Colonel Bowie, off the casualty. If it is not yours, at least it is a replacement.” Jack got another, wrapped it around and over body armor. Rod suspected that Jack had slept in the armor, but he said nothing. If Jack considered such marginal protection more important than agility, that was Jack’s business—each to his own methods, as the Deacon would say.

The tree stood in a semi-clearing but Jack brought Rod to it through bushes which came close to the trunk and made the final approach as a belly sneak. Jack pulled Rod’s head over and whispered in his ear, “If we lie still for three or four hours, I’m betting that he will either come down or go up.”

“Okay. You watch our rear.”

For an hour nothing happened. Rod tried to ignore tiny flies that seemed to be all bite. Silently he shifted position to ward off stiffness and once had to kill a sneeze. At last he said, “Pssst!”

“Yeah, Rod?”

“Where those two big branches meet the trunk, could that be his nest?”

“Maybe.”

“You see a hand sticking out?”

“Where? Uh, I think I see what you see. It might just be leaves.”

“I think it’s a hand and I think he is dead; it hasn’t moved since we got here.”

“Asleep?”

“Person asleep ordinarily doesn’t hold still that long. I’m going up. Cover me. If that hand moves, yell.”

“You ought not to risk it, Rod.”

“You keep your eyes peeled.” He crept forward.

The owner of the hand was Jimmy Throxton, as Rod had suspected since hearing the description. Jimmy was not dead, but he was unconscious and Rod could not rouse him.

Jim lay in an aerie half natural, half artificial; Rod could see that Jim had cut small branches and improved the triple crotch formed by two limbs and trunk. He lay cradled in this eagle’s nest, one hand trailing out.

Getting him down was awkward; he weighed as much as Rod did. Rod put a sling under Jim’s armpits and took a turn around a branch, checking the line by friction to lower him—but the hard part was getting Jim out of his musty bed without dropping him.

Halfway down the burden fouled and Jack had to climb and free it. But with much sweat all three reached the ground and Jim was still

breathing.

Rod had to carry him. Jack offered to take turns but the disparity in sizes was obvious; Rod said angrily for Jack to cover them, front, rear, all sides; Rod would be helpless if they had the luck to be surprised by one of the pseudo-lions.

The worst part was the climbing traverse over loose shale up to the cave. Rod was fagged from carrying the limp and heavy load more than a kilometer over rough ground; he had to rest before he could tackle it. When he did, Jack said anxiously, “Don’t drop him in the drink! It won’t be worthwhile fishing him out—I know.”

“So do I. Don’t give silly advice.”

“Sorry.”

Rod started up, as much worried for his own hide as for Jim’s. He did not know what it was that lived in that stream; he did know that it was hungry. There was a bad time when he reached the spot where the jutting limestone made it necessary to stoop to reach the shelf. He got down as low as possible, attempted it, felt the burden on his back catch on the rock, started to slip.

Jack’s hand steadied him and shoved him from behind. Then they were sprawled safe on the shelf and Rod gasped and tried to stop the trembling of his abused muscles.

They bedded Jimmy down and Jack took his pulse. “Fast and thready. I don’t think he’s going to make it.”

“What medicines do you have?”

“Two of the neosulfas and verdomycin. But I don’t know what to give him.”

“Give him all three and pray.”

“He might be allergic to one of them.”

“He’ll be more allergic to dying. I’ll bet he’s running six degrees of fever. Come on.”

Rod supported Jim’s shoulders, pinched his ear lobe, brought him partly out of coma. Between them they managed to get the capsules into Jim’s mouth, got him to drink and wash them down. After that there was nothing they could do but let him rest.

They took turns watching him through the night. About dawn his fever broke, he roused and asked for water. Rod held him while Jack handled the waterskin. Jim drank deeply, then went back to sleep.

They never left him alone. Jack did the nursing and Rod hunted each day, trying to find items young and tender and suited to an invalid’s palate. By the second day Jim, although weak and helpless, was able to talk without drifting off to sleep in the middle. Rod returned in the afternoon with the carcass of a small animal which seemed to be

a clumsy cross between a cat and a rabbit. He encountered Jack heading down to fill the water skin. “Hi.”

“Hi. I see you had luck. Say, Rod, go easy when you skin it. We need a new water bag. Is it cut much?”

“Not at all. I knocked it over with a rock.”

“Good!”

“How’s the patient?”

“Healthier by the minute. I’ll be up shortly.”

“Want me to cover you while you fill the skin?”

“I’ll be careful. Go up to Jim.”

Rod went up, laid his kill on the shelf, crawled inside. “Feeling better?”

“Swell. I’ll wrestle you two falls out of three.”

“Next week. Jack taking good care of you?”

“You bet. Say, Rod, I don’t know how to thank you two. If it hadn’t been for—”

“Then don’t try. You don’t owe me anything, ever. And Jack’s my partner, so it’s right with Jack.”

“Jack is swell.”

“Jack is a good boy. They don’t come better. He and I really hit it off.”

Jim looked surprised, opened his mouth, closed it suddenly. “What’s the matter?” Rod asked. “Something bite you? Or are you feeling bad again?”

“What,” Jim said slowly, “did you say about Jack?”

“Huh? I said they don’t come any better. He and I team up like bacon and eggs. A number-one kid, that boy.”

Jimmy Throxton looked at him. “Rod…were you born that stupid? Or did you have to study?”

“Huh?”

“Jack is a *girl*.”

7

“I Should Have Baked a Cake”

THERE FOLLOWED A LONG SILENCE. “Well,” said Jim, “close your mouth before something flies in.”

“Jimmy, you’re still out of your head.”

“I may be out of my head, but not so I can’t tell a girl from a boy. When that day comes, I won’t be sick; I’ll be dead.”

“But…”

Jim shrugged. “Ask her.”

A shadow fell across the opening; Rod turned and saw Jack scrambling up to the shelf. “Fresh water, Jimmy!”

“Thanks, kid.” Jim added to Rod, “Go on, dopy!”

Jack looked from one to the other. “Why the tableau? What are you staring for, Rod?”

“Jack,” he said slowly, “what is your name?”

“Huh? Jack Daudet. I told you that.”

“No, no! What’s your full name, your legal name?”

Jack looked from Rod to Jimmy’s grinning face and back again. “My full name is… Jacqueline Marie Daudet—if it’s any business of yours. Want to make something of it?”

Rod took a deep breath. “Jacqueline,” he said carefully, “I didn’t know. I—”

“You weren’t supposed to.”

“I—Look, if I’ve said anything to offend you, I surely didn’t mean to.”

“You haven’t said anything to offend me, you big stupid dear. Except about your knife.”

“I didn’t mean that.”

“You mean about girls being poison? Well, did it ever occur to you that maybe boys are pure poison, too? Under these circumstances? No, of course it didn’t. But I don’t mind your knowing now…now that there are three of us.”

“But, Jacqueline—”

“Call me ‘Jack,’ please.” She twisted her shoulders uncomfortably. “Now that you know, I won’t have to wear this beetle case any longer. Turn your backs, both of you.”

“Uh…” Rod turned his back. Jimmy rolled over, eyes to the wall.

In a few moments Jacqueline said, “Okay.” Rod turned around. In shirt and trousers, without torso armor, her shoulders seemed narrower and she herself was slender now and pleasantly curved. She was scratching her ribs. “I haven’t been able to scratch properly since I met you, Rod Walker,” she said accusingly. “Sometimes I almost died.”

“I didn’t make you wear it.”

“Suppose I hadn’t? Would you have teamed with me?”

“Uh…well, it’s like this. I…” He stopped.

“You see?” She suddenly looked worried. “We’re still partners?”

“Huh? Oh, sure, sure!”

“Then shake on it again. This time we shake with Jimmy, too. Right, Jim?”

“You bet, Jack.”

They made a three-cornered handshake. Jack pressed her left hand over the combined fists and said solemnly, “All for one!”

Rod drew Colonel Bowie with his left hand, laid the flat of the blade on the stacked hands. “And one for all!”

“Plus sales tax,” Jimmy added. “Do we get it notarized?”

Jacqueline’s eyes were swimming with tears. “Jimmy Throxton,” she said fiercely, “someday I am going to make you take life seriously!”

“I take life seriously,” he objected. “I just don’t want life to take me seriously. When you’re on borrowed time, you can’t afford not to laugh.”

“We’re all on borrowed time,” Rod answered him. “Shut up, Jimmy. You talk too much.”

“Look who’s preaching! The Decibel Kid himself.”

“Well…you ought not to make fun of Jacqueline. She’s done a lot for you.”

“She has indeed!”

“Then—”

“‘Then’ nothing!” Jacqueline said sharply. “My name is ‘Jack.’ Rod. Forget ‘Jacqueline.’ If either of you starts treating me with gallantry we’ll have all those troubles you warned me about. ‘Pure poison’ was the expression you used, as I recall.”

“But you can reasonably expect—”

“Are you going to be ‘logical’ again? Let’s be practical instead. Help me skin this beast and make a new water bag.”

The following day Jimmy took over housekeeping and Jack and

Rod started hunting together. Jim wanted to come along; he ran into a double veto. There was little advantage in hunting as a threesome whereas Jack and Rod paired off so well that a hunt was never hours of waiting, but merely a matter of finding game. Jack would drive and Rod would kill; they would pick their quarry from the fringe of a herd, Jack would sneak around and panic the animals, usually driving one into Rod's arms.

They still hunted with the knife, even though Jack's gun was a good choice for primitive survival, being an air gun that threw poisoned darts. Since the darts could be recovered and re-envenomed, it was a gun which would last almost indefinitely; she had chosen it for this reason over cartridge or energy guns.

Rod had admired it but decided against hunting with it. "The air pressure might bleed off and let you down."

"It never has. And you can pump it up again awfully fast."

"Mmm…yes. But if we use it, someday the last dart will be lost no matter how careful we are…and that might be the day we would need it bad. We may be here a long time, what do you say we save it?"

"You're the boss, Rod."

"No, I'm not. We all have equal say."

"Yes, you are. Jimmy and I agreed on that. Somebody has to boss."

Hunting took an hour or so every second day; they spent most of daylight hours searching for another team mate, quartering the area and doing it systematically. Once they drove scavengers from a kill which seemed to have been butchered by knife; they followed a spoor from that and determined that it was a human spoor, but were forced by darkness to return to the cave. They tried to pick it up the next day, but it had rained hard in the night; they never found it.

Another time they found ashes of a fire, but Rod judged them to be at least two weeks old.

After a week of fruitless searching they returned one late afternoon. Jimmy looked up from the fire he had started. "How goes the census?"

"Don't ask," Rod answered, throwing himself down wearily. "What's for dinner?"

"Raw buck, roast buck, and burned buck. I tried baking some of it in wet clay. It didn't work out too well, but I've got some awfully good baked clay for dessert."

"Thanks. If that is the word."

"Jim," Jack said, "we ought to try to bake pots with that clay."

"I did. Big crack in my first effort. But I'll get the hang of it. Look, children," he went on, "has it ever occurred to your bright little minds that you might be going about this the wrong way?"

“What’s wrong with it?” Rod demanded.

“Nothing…if it is exercise you are after. You are and scurrying over the countryside, getting in and nowhere else. Maybe it would be better to sit back and let them come to you.”

“How?”

“Send up a smoke signal.”

“We’ve discussed that We don’t want just anybody and we don’t want to advertise where we live. We want people who will strengthen the team.”

“That is what the engineers call a self-defeating criterion. The superior woodsman you want is just the laddy you will never find by hunting for him. *He* may find *you*, as you go tramping noisily through the brush, kicking rocks and stepping on twigs and scaring the birds. He may shadow you to see what you are up to. But *you* won’t find *him*.”

“Rod, there is something to that,” Jack said.

“We found *you* easily enough,” Rod said to Jim. “Maybe you aren’t the high type we need.”

“I wasn’t myself at the time,” Jimmy answered blandly. “Wait till I get my strength back and my true nature will show. Ugh-Ugh, the ape man, that’s me. Half Neanderthal and half sleek black leopard.” He beat his chest and coughed.

“Are those the proportions? The Neanderthal strain seems dominant.”

“Don’t be disrespectful. Remember, you are my debtor.”

“I think you read the backs of those cards. They are getting to be like waffles.” When rescued, Jimmy had had on him a pack of playing cards, and had later explained that they were survival equipment.

“In the first place,” he had said, “if I got lost I could sit down and play solitaire. Pretty soon somebody would come along and—”

“Tell you to play the black ten on the red jack. We’ve heard that one.”

“Quiet, Rod. In the second place, Jack, I expected to team with old Stoneface here. I can always beat him at cribbage but he doesn’t believe it. I figured that during the test I could win all his next year’s allowance. Survival tactics.”

Whatever his reasoning, Jimmy had had the cards. The three played a family game each evening at a million plutons a point. Jacqueline stayed more or less even but Rod owed Jimmy several hundred millions. They continued the discussion that evening over their game. Rod was still wary of advertising their hide-out.

“We might burn a smoke signal somewhere, though,” he said thoughtfully. “Then keep watch from a safe spot. Cut ’em, Jim.”

“Consider the relative risks—a five, just what I needed! If you put the fire far enough away to keep this place secret, then it means a trek back and forth at least twice a day. With all that running around you’ll use up your luck; one day you won’t come back. It’s not that I’m fond you, but it would bust up the game.”

“Whose crib?”

“Jack’s. But if we burn it close by and in sight, then we sit up here safe and snug. I’ll have my back to the wall facing the path, with Jack’s *phht* gun in my lap. If an unfriendly face sticks up—*blooie!* Long pig for dinner. But if we like them, we cut them into the game.”

“Your count.”

“Fifteen-six, fifteen-twelve, a pair, six for jacks and the right jack. That’s going to cost you another million, my friend.”

“One of those jacks is a queen,” Rod said darkly.

“Sure enough? You know, it’s getting too dark to play. Want to concede?”

They adopted Jim’s scheme. It gave more time for cribbage and ran Rod’s debt up into billions. The signal fire was kept burning on the shelf at the downstream end, the prevailing wind being such that smoke usually did not blow back into the cave—when the wind did shift was unbearable; they were forced to flee, eyes streaming.

This happened three times in four days. Their advertising had roused no customers and they were all getting tired of dragging up dead wood for fuel and green branches for smoke. The third time they fled from smoke Jimmy said, “Rod, I give up. You win. This is not the way to do it.”

“No!”

“Huh? Have a heart, chum. I can’t live on smoke—no vitamins. Let’s run up a flag instead. I’ll contribute my shirt.”

Rod thought about it. “We’ll do that.”

“Hey, wait a minute. I was speaking rhetorically. I’m the delicate type. I sunburn easily.”

“You can take it easy and work up a tan. We’ll use your shirt as a signal flag. But we’ll keep the fire going, too. Not up on the shelf, but down there—on that mud flat, maybe.”

“And have the smoke blow right back into our summer cottage.”

“Well, farther downstream. We’ll make a bigger fire and a column of smoke that can be seen a long way. The flag we will put up right over the cave.”

“Thereby inviting eviction proceedings from large, hairy individuals with no feeling for property rights.”

“We took that chance when we decided to use a smoke signal. Let’s

get busy."

Rod picked a tall tree on the bluff above. He climbed to where the trunk had thinned down so much that it would hardly take his weight, then spent a tedious hour topping it with his knife. He tied the sleeves of Jim's shirt to it, then worked down, cutting foliage away as he went. Presently the branches became too large to handle with his knife, but the stripped main stem stuck up for several meters; the shirt could be seen for a long distance up and down stream. The shirt caught the wind and billowed; Rod eyed it, tired but satisfied—it was unquestionably a signal flag.

Jimmy and Jacqueline had built a new smudge farther downstream, carrying fire from the shelf for the purpose. Jacqueline still had a few matches and Jim had a pocket torch almost fully charged but the realization that they were marooned caused them to be miserly. Rod went down and joined them. The smoke was enormously greater now that they were not limited in space, and fuel was easier to fetch.

Rod looked them over. Jacqueline's face, sweaty and none too clean to start with, was now black with smoke, while Jimmy's pink skin showed the soot even more. "A couple of pyromaniacs."

"You ordered smoke," Jimmy told him. "I plan to make the burning of Rome look like a bonfire. Fetch me a violin and a toga."

"Violins weren't invented then. Nero played a lyre."

"Let's not be small. We're getting a nice mushroom cloud effect, don't you think?"

"Come on, Rod," Jacqueline urged, Wiping her face without improving it. "It's fun!" She dipped a green branch in the stream, threw it on the pyre. A thick cloud of smoke and steam concealed her. "More dry wood, Jimmy."

"Coming!"

Rod joined in, soon was as dirty and scorched as the other two and having more fun than he had had since the test started. When the sun dropped below the tree tops they at last quit trying to make the fire bigger and better and smokier and reluctantly headed up to their cave. Only then did Rod realize that he had forgotten to remain alert.

Oh well, he assured himself, dangerous animals would avoid a fire.

While they ate they could see the dying fire still sending up smoke. After dinner Jimmy got out his cards, tried to riffle the limp mass. "Anyone interested in a friendly game? The customary small stakes."

"I'm too tired," Rod answered. "Just chalk up my usual losses."

"That's not a sporting attitude. Why, you won a game just last week. How about you, Jack?"

Jacqueline started to answer; Rod suddenly motioned for silence. "Sssh! I heard something."

The other two froze and silently got out their knives. Rod put Colonel Bowie in his teeth and crawled out to the edge. The pathway was clear and the thorn barricade was undisturbed. He leaned out and looked around, trying to locate the sound.

"Ahoy below!" a voice called out, not loudly. Rod felt himself tense. He glanced back, saw Jimmy moving diagonally over to cover the pathway. Jacqueline had her dart gun and was hurriedly pumping it up.

Rod answered, "Who's there?"

There was a short silence. Then the voice answered, "Bob Baxter and Carmen Garcia. Who are you?"

Rod sighed with relief. "Rod Walker, Jimmy Throxton. And one other, not our class… Jack Daudet."

Baxter seemed to think this over. "Uh, can we join you? For tonight, at least?"

"Sure!"

"How can we get down there? Carmen can't climb very well; she's got a bad foot."

"You're right above us?"

"I think so. I can't see you."

"Stay there. I'll come up." Rod turned, grinned at the others. "Company for dinner! Get a fire going, Jim."

Jimmy clucked mournfully. "And hardly a thing in the house. I should have baked a cake."

By the time they returned Jimmy had roast meat waiting. Carmen's semi-crippled condition had delayed them. It was just a sprained ankle but it caused her to crawl up the traverse on her hands, and progress to that point had been slow and painful.

When she realized that the stranger in the party was another woman she burst into tears. Jackie glared at the males, for no cause that Rod could see, then led her into the remote corner of the cave where she herself slept. There they whispered while Bob Baxter compared notes with Rod and Jim.

Bob and Carmen had had no unusual trouble until Carmen had hurt her ankle two days earlier…except for the obvious fact that something had gone wrong and they were stranded. "I lost my grip," he admitted, "when I realized that they weren't picking us up. But Carmen snapped me out of it. Carmen is a very practical kid."

"Girls are always the practical ones," Jimmy agreed. "Now take me —I'm the poetical type."

"Blank verse, I'd say," Rod suggested.

"Jealousy ill becomes you, Rod. Bob, old bean, can I interest you in

another slice? Rare, or well carbonized?”

“Either way. We haven’t had much to eat the last couple of days. Boy, does this taste good!”

“My own sauce,” Jimmy said modestly. “I raise my own herbs, you know. First you melt a lump of butter slowly in a pan, then you—”

“Shut up, Jimmy. Bob, do you and Carmen want to team with us? As I see it, we can’t count on ever getting back. Therefore we ought to make plans for the future.”

“I think you are right.”

“Rod is always right,” Jimmy agreed. “‘Plans for the future—’ Hmm, yes… Bob, do you and Carmen play cribbage?”

“No.”

“Never mind. I’ll teach you.”

8

“Fish, or Cut Bait”

THE DECISION TO KEEP ON BURNING THE SMOKE SIGNAL and thereby to call in as many recruits as possible was never voted on; it formed itself. The next morning Rod intended to bring the matter up but Jimmy and Bob rebuilt the smoke fire from its embers while down to fetch fresh water. Rod let the accomplished fact stand; two girls drifted in separately that day.

Nor was there any formal contract to team nor any selection of a team captain; Rod continued to direct operations and Bob Baxter accepted the arrangement. Rod did not think about it as he was too busy. The problems of food, shelter, and safety for their growing population left him no time to worry about it.

The arrival of Bob and Carmen cleaned out the larder; it was necessary to hunt the next day. Bob Baxter offered to go, but Rod decided to take Jackie as usual. “You rest today. Don’t let Carmen put her weight on that bad ankle and don’t let Jimmy go down alone to tend the fire. He thinks he is well again but he is not.”

“I see that.”

Jack and Rod went out, made their kill quickly. But Rod failed to kill clean and when Jacqueline moved in to help finish the thrashing, wounded buck she was kicked in the ribs. She insisted that she was not hurt; nevertheless her side was sore the following morning and Bob Baxter expressed the opinion that she had cracked a rib.

In the meantime two new mouths to feed had been added, just as Rod found himself with three on the sick list. But one of the new mouths was a big, grinning one belonging to Caroline Mshiyeni; Rod picked her as his hunting partner.

Jackie looked sour. She got Rod aside and whispered, “You haven’t any reason to do this to me. I can hunt. My side is all right, just a little stiff.”

“It is, huh? So it slows you down when I need you. I can’t chance it, Jack.”

She glanced at Caroline, stuck out her lip and looked stubborn. Rod said urgently, “Jack, remember what I said about petty jealousies? So help me, you make trouble and I’ll paddle you.”

“You aren’t big enough!”

“I’ll get help. Now, look—are we partners?”

“Well, I *thought* so.”

“Then be one and don’t cause trouble.”

She shrugged. “All right. Don’t rub it in—I’ll stay home.”

“I want you to do more than that. Take that old bandage of mine—it’s around somewhere—and let Bob Baxter strap your ribs.”

“No!”

“Then let Carmen do it. They’re both quack doctors, sort of.” He raised his voice. “Ready, Carol?”

“Quiverin’ and bristlin’.”

Rod told Caroline how he and Jacqueline hunted, explained what he expected of her. They located, and avoided, two family herds; old bulls were tough and poor eating and attempting to kill anything but the bull was foolishly dangerous. About noon they found a yearling herd upwind; they split and placed themselves cross wind for the kill. Rod waited for Caroline to flush the game, drive it to him.

He continued to wait. He was getting fidgets when Caroline showed up, moving silently. She motioned for him to follow. He did so, hard put to keep up with her and still move quietly. Presently she stopped; he caught up and saw that she had already made a kill. He looked at it and fought down the anger he felt.

Caroline spoke. “Nice tender one, I think. Suit you, Rod?”

He nodded. “Couldn’t be better. A clean kill, too. Carol?”

“Huh?”

“I think you are better at this than I am.”

“Oh, shucks, it was just luck.” She grinned and looked sheepish.

“I don’t believe in luck. Any time you want to lead the hunt, let me know. But be darn sure you let me know.”

She looked at his unsmiling face, said slowly, “By any chance are you bawling me out?”

“You could call it that. I’m saying that any time you want to lead the hunt, you tell me. Don’t switch in the middle. Don’t ever. I mean it.”

“What’s the matter with you, Rod? Getting your feelings hurt just because I got there first—that’s silly!”

Rod sighed. “Maybe that’s it. Or maybe I don’t like having a girl take the kill away from me. But I’m dead sure about one thing: I don’t like having a partner on a hunt who can’t be depended on. Too many ways to get hurt. I’d rather hunt alone.”

“Maybe I’d rather hunt alone! I don’t need any help.”

“I’m sure you don’t. Let’s forget it, huh, and get this carcass back to camp.”

Caroline did not say anything while they butchered. When they had

the waste trimmed away and were ready to pack as much as possible back to the others Rod said, “You lead off. I’ll watch behind.”

“Rod?”

“Huh?”

“I’m sorry.”

“What? Oh, forget it.”

“I won’t ever do it again. Look, I’ll tell everybody you made the kill.”

He stopped and put a hand on her arm. “Why tell anybody anything? It’s nobody’s business how we organize our hunt as long as we bring home the meat.”

“You’re still angry with me.”

“I never was angry,” he lied. “I just don’t want us to get each other crossed up.”

“Roddie, I’ll never cross you up again! Promise.”

Girls stayed in the majority to the end of the week. The cave, comfortable for three, adequate for twice that number, was crowded for the number that was daily accumulating. Rod decided to make it a girls’ dormitory and moved the males out into the open on the field at the foot of the path up the shale. The spot was unprotected against weather and animals but it did guard the only access to the cave. Weather was no problem; protection against animals was set up as well as could be managed by organizing a night watch whose duty it was to keep fires burning between the bluff and the creek on the upstream side and in the bottleneck downstream.

Rod did not like the arrangements, but they were the best he could do at the time. He sent Bob Baxter and Roy Kilroy downstream to scout for caves and Caroline and Margery Chung upstream for the same purpose. Neither party was successful in the one-day limit he had imposed; the two girls brought back another straggler.

A group of four boys came in a week after Jim’s shirt had been requisitioned; it brought the number up to twenty-five and shifted the balance to more boys than girls. The four newcomers could have been classed as men rather than boys, since they were two or three years older than the average. Three of the four classes in this survival-test area had been about to graduate from secondary schools; the fourth class, which included these four, came from Outlands Arts College of Teller University.

“Adult” is a slippery term. Some cultures have placed adult age as low as eleven years, others as high as thirty-five—and some have not recognized any such age as long as an ancestor remained alive. Rod did not think of these new arrivals as senior to him. There were already a few from Teller U. in the group, but Rod was only vaguely aware

which ones they were—they fitted in. He was too busy with the snowballing problems of his growing colony to worry about their backgrounds on remote Terra.

The four were Jock McGowan, a brawny youth who seemed all hands and feet, his younger brother Bruce, and Chad Ames and Dick Burke. They had arrived late in the day and Rod had not had time to get acquainted, nor was there time the following morning, as a group of four girls and five boys poured in on them unexpectedly. This had increased his administrative problems almost to the breaking point; the cave would hardly sleep four more females. It was necessary to find, or build, more shelter.

Rod went over to the four young men lounging near the cooking fire. He squatted on his heels and asked, “Any of you know anything about building?”

He addressed them all, but the others waited for Jock McGowan to speak. “Some,” Jock admitted. “I reckon I could build anything I wanted to.”

“Nothing hard,” Rod explained. “Just stone walls. Ever tried your hand at masonry?”

“Sure. What of it?”

“Well, here’s the idea. We’ve got to have better living arrangements right away—we’ve got people pouring out of our ears. The first thing we are going to do is to throw a wall from the bluff to the creek across this flat area. After that we will build huts, but the first thing is a kraal to stop dangerous animals.”

McGowan laughed. “That will be some wall. Have you seen this dingus that looks like an elongated cougar? One of those babies would go over your wall before you could say ‘scat.’”

“I know about them,” Rod admitted, “and I don’t like them.” He rubbed the long white scars on his left arm. “They probably could go over any wall we could build. So we’ll rig a surprise for them.” He picked up a twig and started drawing in the dirt. “We build the wall… and bring it around to here. Then, inside for about six meters, we set up sharpened poles. Anything comes over the wall splits its gut on the poles.”

Jock McGowan looked at the diagram. “Futile.”

“Silly,” agreed his brother.

Rod flushed but answered, “Got a better idea?”

“That’s beside the point.”

“Well,” Rod answered slowly, “unless somebody comes down with a better scheme, or unless we find really good caves, we’ve got to fortify this spot the best we can…so we’ll do this. I’m going to set the girls to cutting and sharpening stakes. The rest of us will start on the

wall. If we tear into it we ought to have a lot of it built before dark. Do you four want to work together? There will be one party collecting rock and another digging clay and making clay mortar. Take your choice."

Again three of them waited. Jock McGowan lay back and laced his hands under his head. "Sorry. I've got a date to hunt today."

Rod felt himself turning red. "We don't need a kill today," he said carefully.

"Nobody asked you, youngster."

Rod felt the cold tenseness he always felt in a hunt He was uncomfortably aware that an audience had gathered. He tried to keep his voice steady and said, "Maybe I've made a mistake. I—"

"You have."

"I thought you four had teamed with the rest of us. Well?"

"Maybe. Maybe not."

"You'll have to fish or cut bait. If you join, you work like anybody else. If not—well, you're welcome to breakfast and stop in again some time. But be on your way. I won't have you lounging around while everybody else is working."

Jock McGowan sucked his teeth, dug at a crevice with his tongue. His hands were still locked back of his head. "What you don't understand, sonny boy, is that nobody gives the McGowans orders. Nobody. Right, Bruce?"

"Right, Jock."

"Right, Chad? Dick?"

The other two grunted approval. McGowan continued to stare up at the sky. "So," he said softly, "I go where I want to go and stay as long as I like. The question is not whether we are going to join up with you, but what ones am going to let team with us. But not you, sonny boy; you are still wet behind your ears."

"Get up and get out of here!" Rod started to stand up. He was wearing Colonel Bowie, as always, but he did not reach for it. He began to straighten up from squatting.

Jock McGowan's eyes flicked toward his brother. Rod was hit low…and found himself flat on his face with his breath knocked out. He felt the sharp kiss of a knife against his ribs; he held still. Bruce called out, "How about it, Jock?"

Rod could not see Jock McGowan. But he heard him answer, "Just keep him there."

"Right, Jock."

Jock McGowan was wearing both gun and knife. Rod now heard him say, "Anybody want to dance? Any trouble out of the rest of you lugs?"

Rod still could not see Jock, but he could figure from the naked, startled expressions of a dozen others that McGowan must have rolled to his feet and covered them with his gun. Everybody in camp carried knives; most had guns as well and Rod could see that Roy Kilroy was wearing his—although most guns were kept when not in use in the cave in a little arsenal which Carmen superintended.

But neither guns nor knives were of use; it had happened too fast, shifting from wordy wrangling to violence with no warning. Rod could see none of his special friends from where he was; those whom he could see did not seem disposed to risk death to rescue him.

Jock McGowan said briskly, "Chad—Dick—got 'em all covered?"

"Right, Skipper."

"Keep 'em that way while I take care of this cholo." His hairy legs appeared in front of Rod's face. "Pulled his teeth, Bruce?"

"Not yet."

"I'll do it. Roll over, sonny boy, and let me at your knife. Let him turn over, Bruce."

Bruce McGowan eased up on Rod and Jock bent down. As he reached for Rod's knife a tiny steel flower blossomed in Jock's side below his ribs. Rod heard nothing, not even the small sound it must have made when it struck. Jock straightened up with a shriek, clutched at his side.

Bruce yelled, "Jock! What's the matter?"

"They got me." He crumpled to the ground like loose clothing.

Rod still had a man with a knife on his back but the moment was enough; he rolled and grabbed in one violent movement and the situation was reversed, with Bruce's right wrist locked in Rod's fist, with Colonel Bowie threatening Bruce's face.

A loud contralto voice sang out, "Take it easy down there! We got you covered."

Rod glanced up. Caroline stood on the shelf at the top of the path to the cave, with a rifle at her shoulder. At the downstream end of the shelf Jacqueline sat with her little dart gun in her lap; she was frantically pumping up again. She raised it, drew a bead on some one past Rod's shoulder.

Rod called out, "Don't shoot!" He looked around. "Drop it, you two!"

Chad Ames and Dick Burke dropped their guns. Rod added, "Roy! Grant Cowper! Gather up their toys. Get their knives, too." He turned back to Bruce McGowan, pricked him under the chin. "Let's have your knife." Bruce turned it loose; Rod took it and got to his feet.

Everyone who had been up in the cave was swarming down, Caroline in the lead. Jock McGowan was writhing on the ground, face

turned blue and gasping in the sort of paralysis induced by the poison used on darts. Bob Baxter hurried up, glanced at him, then said to Rod, "I'll take care of that cut in your ribs in a moment." He bent over Jock McGowan.

Caroline said indignantly, "You aren't going to try to save him?"

"Of course."

"Why? Let's chuck him in the stream."

Baxter glanced at Rod. Rod felt a strong urge to order Caroline's suggestion carried out. But he answered, "Do what you can for him, Bob. Where's Jack? Jack—you've got antidote for your darts, haven't you? Get it."

Jacqueline looked scornfully at the figure on the ground. "What for? He's not hurt."

"Huh?"

"Just a pin prick. A practice dart—that's all I keep in Betsey. My hunting darts are put away so that nobody can hurt themselves—and I didn't have time to get them." She prodded Jock with a toe. "He's not poisoned. He's scaring himself to death."

Caroline chortled and waved the rifle she carried. "And this one is empty. Not even a good club."

Baxter said to Jackie, "Are you sure? The reactions look typical."

"Sure I'm sure! See the mark on the end sticking out? A target dart."

Baxter leaned over his patient, started slapping his face. "Snap out of it, McGowan! Stand up. I want to get that dart out of you."

McGowan groaned and managed to stand. Baxter took the dart between thumb and forefinger, jerked it free; Jock yelled. Baxter slapped him again. "Don't you faint on me," he growled. "you're lucky. Let it drain and you'll be all right." He turned to Rod. "You're next."

"Huh? There's nothing the matter with *me*."

"That stuff on your ribs is paint, I suppose." He looked around. "Carmen, get my kit."

"I brought it down."

"Good. Rod, sit down and lean forward. This is going to hurt a little."

It did hurt. Rod tried to chat to avoid showing that he minded it. "Carol," he asked, "I don't see how you and Jackie worked out a plan so fast. That was smooth."

"Huh? We didn't work out a plan; we both just did what we could and did it fast." She turned to Jacqueline and gave her a clap on the shoulder that nearly knocked her over. "This kid is solid, Roddie, solid!"

Jacqueline recovered, looked pleased and tried not to show it. “Aw, Carol!”

“Anyway I thank you both.”

“A pleasure. I wish that pea shooter had been loaded. Rod, what are you going to do with them?”

“Well…ummph!”

“Whoops!” said Baxter, behind him. “I said it was going to hurt. I had better put one more clip in. I’d like to put a dressing on that, but we can’t, so you lay off heavy work for a while and sleep on your stomach.”

“Unh!” said Rod.

“That’s the last. You can get up now. Take it easy and give it a chance to scab.”

“I still think,” Caroline insisted, “that we ought to make them swim the creek. We could make bets on whether or not any of ’em make it across.”

“Carol, you’re uncivilized.”

“I never claimed to be civilized. But I know which end wags and which end bites.”

Rod ignored her and went to look at the prisoners. Roy Kilroy had caused them to lie down one on top of the other; it rendered them undignified and helpless. “Let them sit up.”

Kilroy and Grant Cowper had been guarding them. Cowper said, “You heard the Captain. Sit up.” They unsnarled and sat up, looking glum.

Rod looked at Jock McGowan. “What do you think we ought to do with you?”

McGowan said nothing. The puncture in his side was oozing blood and he was pale. Rod said slowly, “Some think we ought to chuck you in the stream. That’s the same as condemning you to death—but if we are going to, we ought to shoot you or hang you. I don’t favor letting anybody be eaten alive. Should we hang you?”

Bruce McGowan blurted out, “We haven’t done anything.”

“No. But you sure tried. You aren’t safe to have around other people.”

Somebody called out, “Oh, let’s shoot them and get it over with!” Rod ignored it. Grant Cowper came close to Rod and said, “We ought to vote on this. They ought to have a trial.”

Rod shook his head. “No.” He went on to the prisoners, “I don’t favor punishing you—this is personal. But we can’t risk having you around either.” He turned to Cowper. “Give them their knives.”

“Rod? You’re not going to fight them?”

“Of course not.” He turned back. “You can have your knives; we’re keeping your guns. When we turn you loose, head downstream and keep going. Keep going for at least a week. If you ever show your faces again, you won’t get a chance to explain. Understand me?”

Jock McGowan nodded. Dick Burke gulped and said, “But turning us out with just knives is the same as killing us.”

“Nonsense! No guns. And remember, if you turn back this way, even to hunt, it’s once too many. There may be somebody trailing you —with a gun.”

“Loaded this time!” added Caroline. “Hey, Roddie, I want that job. Can I? Please?”

“Shut up, Carol. Roy, you and Grant start them on their way.”

As exiles and guards, plus sightseers, moved off they ran into Jimmy Throxton coming back into camp. He stopped and stared. “What’s the procession? Rod…what have you done to your ribs, boy? Scratching yourself again?”

Several people tried to tell him at once. He got the gist of it and shook his head mournfully. “And there I was, good as gold, looking for pretty rocks for our garden wall. Every time there’s a party people forget to ask *me*. Discrimination.”

“Stow it, Jim. It’s not funny.”

“That’s what I said. It’s discrimination.”

Rod got the group started on the wall with an hour or more of daylight wasted. He tried to work on the wall despite Bob Baxter’s medical orders, but found that he was not up to it; not only was his wound painful but also he felt shaky with reaction.

Grant Cowper looked him up during the noon break. “Skipper, can I talk with you? Privately?”

Rod moved aside with him. “What’s on your mind?”

“Mmm… Rod, you were lucky this morning. You know that, don’t you? No offense intended.”

“Sure, I know. What about it?”

“Uh, do you know *why* you had trouble?”

“What? Of course I know—now. I trusted somebody when I should not have.”

Cowper shook his head. “Not at all. Rod, what do you know about theory of government?”

Rod looked surprised. “I’ve had the usual civics courses. Why?”

“I doubt if I’ve mentioned it, but the course I’m majoring in at Teller U. is colonial administration. One thing we study is how authority comes about in human society and how it is maintained. I’m not criticizing but to be blunt, you almost lost your life because you’ve

never studied such things."

Rod felt annoyed. "What are you driving at?"

"Take it easy. But the fact remains that you didn't have any authority. McGowan knew it and wouldn't take orders. Everybody else knew it, too. When it came to a showdown, nobody knew whether to back you up or not. Because you don't have a milligram of real authority."

"Just a moment! Are you saying I'm not leader of this team?"

"You are *de facto* leader, no doubt about it. But you've never been elected to the job. That's your weakness."

Rod chewed this over. "I know," he said slowly. "It's just that we have been so confounded busy."

"Sure, I know. I'd be the last person to criticize. But a captain ought to be properly elected."

Rod sighed. "I meant to hold an election but I thought getting the wall built was more urgent. All right, let's call them together."

"Oh, you don't need to do it this minute."

"Why not? The sooner the better, apparently."

"Tonight, when it's too dark to work, is soon enough."

"Well…okay."

When they stopped for supper Rod announced that there would be an organization and planning meeting. No one seemed surprised, although he himself had mentioned it to no one. He felt annoyed and had to remind himself that there was nothing secret about it; Grant had been under no obligation to keep it quiet. He set guards and fire tenders, then came back into the circle of firelight and called out, "Quiet, everybody! Let's get started. If you guys on watch can't hear, be sure to speak up" He hesitated. "We're going to hold an election. Somebody pointed out that I never have been elected captain of this survival team. Well, if any of you have your noses out of joint, I'm sorry. I was doing the best I could. But you are entitled to elect a captain. All right, any nominations?"

Jimmy Throxton shouted, "I nominate Rod Walker!"

Caroline's voice answered, "I second it! Move the nominations be closed."

Rod said hastily, "Carol, your motion is out of order."

"Why?"

Before he could answer Roy Kilroy spoke up. "Rod, can I have the floor a moment? Privileged question."

Rod turned, saw that Roy was squatting beside Grant Cowper. "Sure. State your question."

“Matter of procedure. The first thing is to elect a temporary chairman.”

Rod thought quickly. “I guess you’re right. Jimmy, your nomination is thrown out. Nominations for temporary chairman are in order.”

“Rod Walker for temporary chairman!”

“Oh, shut up, Jimmy! I don’t want to be temporary chairman.”

Roy Kilroy was elected. He took the imaginary gavel and announced, “The chair recognizes Brother Cowper for a statement of aims and purposes of this meeting.”

Jimmy Throxton called out, “What do we want any speeches for? Let’s elect Rod and go to bed. I’m tired—and I’ve got a two-hour watch coming up.”

“Out of order. The chair recognizes Grant Cowper.”

Cowper stood up. The firelight caught his handsome features and curly, short beard. Rod rubbed the scraggly growth on his own chin and wished that he looked like Cowper. The young man was dressed only in walking shorts and soft bush shoes but he carried himself with the easy dignity of a distinguished speaker before some important body. “Friends,” he said, “brothers and sisters, we are gathered here tonight not to elect a survival-team captain, but to found a new nation.”

He paused to let the idea sink in. “You know the situation we are in. We fervently hope to be rescued, none more so than I. I will even go so far as to say that I think we will be rescued…eventually. But we have no way of knowing, we have no data on which to base an intelligent guess, as to *when* we will be rescued.

“It might be tomorrow…it might be our descendants a thousand years from now.” He said the last very solemnly.

“But when the main body of our great race re-establishes contact with us, it is up to us, this little group here tonight, whether they find a civilized society…or flea-bitten animals without language, without arts, with the light of reason grown dim…or no survivors at all, nothing but bones picked clean.”

“Not mine!” called out Caroline. Kilroy gave her a dirty look and called for order.

“Not yours, Caroline,” Cowper agreed gravely. “Nor mine. Not any of us. Because tonight we will take the step that will keep this colony alive. We are poor in things; we will make what we need. We are rich in knowledge; among us we hold the basic knowledge of our great race. We must preserve it…we *will!*”

Caroline cut through Cowper’s dramatic pause with a stage whisper. “Talks pretty, doesn’t he? Maybe I’ll marry him.”

He did not try to fit this heckling into his speech. “What is the prime knowledge acquired by our race? That without which the rest is

useless? What flame must we guard like vestal virgins?"

Some one called out, "Fire." Cowper shook his head.

"Writing!"

"The decimal system."

"Atomics!"

"The wheel, of course."

"No, none of those. They are all important, but they are not the keystone. The greatest invention of mankind is government. It is also the hardest of all. More individualistic than cats, nevertheless we have learned to cooperate more efficiently than ants or bees or termites. Wilder, bloodier, and more deadly than sharks, we have learned to live together as peacefully as lambs. But these things are not easy. That is why that which we do tonight will decide our future…and perhaps the future of our children, our children's children, our descendants far into the womb of time. We are not picking a temporary survival leader; we are setting up a government. We must do it with care. We must pick a chief executive for our new nation, a mayor of our city-state. But we must draw up a constitution, sign articles binding us together. We must organize and plan."

"Hear, hear!"

"Bravo!"

"We must establish law, appoint judges, arrange for orderly administration of our code. Take for example, this morning—" Cowper turned to Rod and gave him a friendly smile. "Nothing personal, Rod, you understand that. I think you acted with wisdom and I was happy that you tempered justice with mercy. Yet no one could have criticized if you had yielded to your impulse and killed all four of those, uh… anti-social individuals. But justice should not be subject to the whims of a dictator. We can't stake our lives on your temper…good or bad. You see that, don't you?"

Rod did not answer He felt that he was being accused of bad temper, of being a tyrant and dictator, of being a danger to the group. But he could not put his finger on it. Grant Cowper's remarks had been friendly…yet they felt intensely personal and critical.

Cowper insisted on an answer. "You do see that, Rod? Don't you? You don't want to continue to have absolute power over the lives and persons of our community? You don't want *that?* Do you?" He waited.

"Huh? Oh, yeah, sure! I mean, I agree with you."

"Good! I was sure you would understand. And I must ay that *I* think you have done a very good job in getting us together. I don't agree with any who have criticized you. You were doing your best and we should let bygones be bygones." Cowper grinned that friendly grin and Rod felt as if he were being smothered with kisses.

Cowper turned to Kilroy. “That’s all I have to say, Mr. Chairman.” He flashed his grin and added as he sat down, “Sorry I talked so long, folks. I had to get it off my chest.”

Kilroy clapped his hands once. “The chair will entertain nominations for—Hey, Grant, if we don’t call it ‘captain,’ then what should we call it?”

“Mmm…” Cowper said judicially. “‘President’ seems a little pompous. I think ‘mayor’ would be about right—mayor of our city-state, our village.”

“The chair will entertain nominations for mayor.”

“Hey!” demanded Jimmy Throxton. “Doesn’t anybody else get to shoot off his face?”

“Out of order.”

“No,” Cowper objected, “I don’t think you should rule Jimmy out of order, Roy. Anyone who has something to contribute should be encouraged to speak. We mustn’t act hastily.”

“Okay, Throxton, speak your piece.”

“Oh, I didn’t want to sound off. I just didn’t like the squeeze play.”

“All right, the chair stands corrected. Anybody else? If not, we will entertain—”

“One moment, Mr. Chairman!”

Rod saw that it was Arthur Nielsen, one of the Teller University group. He managed to look neat even in these circumstances but he had strayed into camp bereft of all equipment, without even a knife. He had been quite hungry.

Kilroy looked at him. “You want to talk, Waxie?”

“Nielsen is the name. Or Arthur. As you know. Yes.”

“Okay. Keep it short.”

“I shall keep it as short as circumstances permit. Fellow associates, we have here a unique opportunity, probably one which has not occurred before in history. As Cowper pointed out, we must proceed with care. But, already we have set out on the wrong foot. Our object should be to found the first truly scientific community. Yet what do I find? You are proposing to select an executive by counting noses! Leaders should not be chosen by popular whim; they should be determined by rigorous scientific criteria. Once selected, those leaders must have full scientific freedom to direct the bio-group in accordance with natural law, unhampered by such artificial anachronisms as statutes, constitutions, and courts of law. We have here an adequate supply of healthy females; we have the means to breed scientifically a new race, a super race, a race which, if I may say so—”

A handful of mud struck Nielsen in the chest; he stopped suddenly.

“I saw who did that!” he said angrily. “Just the sort of nincompoop who always—”

“Order, order, please!” Kilroy shouted. “No mudsling or I’ll appoint a squad of sergeants-at-arms. Are you through, Waxie?”

“I was just getting started.”

“Just a moment,” put in Cowper. “Point of order Mr. Chairman. Arthur has a right to be heard. But I think he speaking before the wrong body. We’re going to have a constitutional committee, I’m sure. He should present his arguments to them. Then, if we like them, we can adopt his ideas.”

“You’re right, Grant. Sit down, Waxie.”

“Huh? I appeal!”

Roy Kilroy said briskly, “The chair has ruled this out of order at this time and the speaker has appealed to the house, a priority motion not debatable. All in favor of supporting the chair’s ruling, which is for Waxie to shut up, make it known by saying ‘Aye.’”

There was a shouted chorus of assent. “Opposed: ‘No.’ Sit down, Waxie.”

Kilroy looked around. “Anybody else?”

“Yes.”

“I can’t see. Who is it?”

“Bill Kennedy, Ponce de Leon class. I don’t agree with Nielsen except on one point: we are fiddling around with the wrong things. Sure, we need a group captain but, aside from whatever it takes to eat, we shouldn’t think about anything but how to get back. I don’t want a scientific society; I’d settle for a hot bath and decent food.”

There was scattered applause. The chairman said, “I’d like a bath, too…and I’d fight anybody for a dish of cornflakes. But, Bill, how do you suggest that we go about it?”

“Huh? We set up a crash-priority project and build a gate. Everybody works on it.”

There was silence, then several talked at once: “Crazy! No uranium.”—“We might *find* uranium.”—“Where do we get the tools? Shucks, I don’t even have a screwdriver.”—“But where are we?”—“It is just a matter of—”

“*Quiet!*” yelled Kilroy. “Bill, do you know how to build a gate?”

“No.”

“I doubt if anybody does.”

“That’s a defeatist attitude. Surely some of you educated blokes from Teller have studied the subject. You should get together, pool what you know, and put us to work. Sure, it may take a long time. But that’s what we ought to do.”

Cowper said, “Just a minute, Roy. Bill, I don’t dispute what you say; every idea should be explored. We’re bound to set up a planning committee. Maybe we had better elect a mayor, or a captain, or whatever you want to call him—and then dig into your scheme when we can discuss it in detail. I think it has merit and should be discussed at length. What do you think?”

“Why, sure, Grant. Let’s get on with the election. I just didn’t want that silly stuff about breeding a superman to be the last word.”

“Mr. Chairman! I protest—”

“Shut up, Waxie. Are you ready with nominations for mayor? If there is no objection, the chair rules debate closed and will entertain nominations.”

“I nominate Grant Cowper!”

“Second!”

“I second the nomination.”

“Okay, I third it!”

“Let’s make it unanimous! Question, question!”

Jimmy Throxton’s voice cut through the shouting, “I NOMINATE ROD WALKER!”

Bob Baxter stood up. “Mr. Chairman?”

“Quiet, everybody. Mr. Baxter.”

“I second Rod Walker.”

“Okay. Two nominations, Grant Cowper and Rod Walker. Are there any more?”

There was a brief silence. Then Rod spoke up. “Just a second, Roy.” He found that his voice was trembling and he took two deep breaths before he went on. “I don’t want it. I’ve had all the grief I want for a while and I’d like a rest. Thanks anyhow, Bob. Thanks, Jimmy.”

“Any further nominations?”

“Just a sec, Roy…point of personal privilege.” Grant Cowper stood up. “Rod, I know how you feel. Nobody in his right mind seeks public office…except as a duty, willingness to serve. If you withdraw, I’m going to exercise the same privilege; I don’t want the headaches any more than you do.”

“Now wait a minute, Grant. You—”

“*You* wait a minute. I don’t think either one of us should withdraw; we ought to perform any duty that is handed to us, just as we stand a night watch when it’s our turn. But I think we ought to have more nominations.” He looked around. “Since that mix-up this morning we have as many girls as men…yet both of the candidates are male. That’s not right. Uh, Mr. Chairman, I nominate Caroline Mshiyeni.”

“Huh? Hey, Grant, don’t be silly. I’d look good as a lady mayoress, wouldn’t I? Anyhow, I’m for Roddie.”

“That’s your privilege, Caroline. But you ought to let yourself be placed before the body, just like Rod and myself.”

“Nobody’s going to vote for *me!*”

“That’s where you’re wrong. I’m going to vote for you. But we still ought to have more candidates.”

“Three nominations before the house,” Kilroy announced. “Any more? If not, I declare the—”

“Mr. Chairman!”

“Huh? Okay, Waxie, you want to nominate somebody?”

“Yes.”

“Who?”

“Me.”

“You want to nominate *yourself?*”

“I certainly do. What’s funny about that? I am running on a platform of strict scientific government. I want the rational minds in this group to have someone to vote for.”

Kilroy looked puzzled. “I’m not sure that is correct parliamentary procedure. I’m afraid I’ll have to over—”

“Never mind, never mind!” Caroline chortled. “*I* nominate him. But I’m going to vote for Roddie,” she added.

Kilroy sighed. “Okay, four candidates. I guess we’ll have to have a show of hands. We don’t have anything for ballots.”

Bob Baxter stood up. “Objection, Mr. Chairman. I call for a secret ballot. We can find some way to do it.”

A way was found. Pebbles would signify Rod, a bare twig was a note for Cowper, a green leaf meant Caroline, while one of Jimmy’s ceramic attempts was offered as a ballot box. “How about Nielsen?” Kilroy asked.

Jimmy spoke up. “Uh, maybe this would do: I made another pot the same time I made this one, only it busted. I’ll get chunks of it and all the crackpots are votes for Waxie.”

“Mr. Chairman, I resent the insinua—”

“Save it, Waxie. Pieces of baked clay for you, pebbles for Walker, twigs for Grant, leaves for Carol. Get your votes, folks, then file past and drop them in the ballot box. Shorty, you and Margery act as tellers.”

The tellers solemnly counted the ballots by firelight. There were five votes for Rod, one for Nielsen, none for Caroline, and twenty-two for Cowper. Rod shook hands with Cowper and faded back into the

darkness so that no one would see his face. Caroline looked at the results and said, “Hey, Grant! You promised to vote for me. What happened? Did you vote for yourself? Huh? How about that?”

Rod said nothing. He had voted for Cowper and was certain that the new mayor had not returned the compliment…he was sure who his five friends were. Dog take it!—he had seen it coming; why hadn’t Grant let him bow out?

Grant ignored Caroline’s comment. He briskly assumed the chair and said, “Thank you. Thank you all. I know you want to get to sleep, so I will limit myself tonight to appointing a few committees—”

Rod did not get to sleep at once. He told himself that there was no disgrace in losing an election—shucks, hadn’t his old man lost the time he had run for community corporation board? He told himself, too, that trying to ride herd on those apes was enough to drive a man crazy and he was well out of it—he had never *wanted* the job! Nevertheless there was a lump in his middle and a deep sense of personal failure.

It seemed that he had just gone to sleep…his father was looking at him saying, “You know we are proud of you, son. Still, if you had had the foresight to—” when someone touched his arm.

He was awake, alert, and had Colonel Bowie out at once.

“Put away that toothpick,” Jimmy whispered, “before you hurt somebody. Me, I mean.”

“What’s up?”

“I’m up, I’ve got the fire watch. You’re about to be, because we are holding a session of the inner sanctum.”

“Huh?”

“Shut up and come along. Keep quiet, people are asleep.”

The inner sanctum turned out to be Jimmy, Caroline, Jacqueline, Bob Baxter, and Carmen Garcia. They gathered inside the ring of fire but as far from the sleepers as possible. Rod looked around at his friends. “What’s this all about?”

“It’s about this,” Jimmy said seriously. “You’re our Captain. And we like that election as much as I like a crooked deck of cards.”

“That’s right,” agreed Caroline. “All that fancy talk!”

“Huh? Everybody got to talk. Everybody got to vote.”

“Yes,” agreed Baxter. “Yes…and no.”

“It was all proper. I have no kick.”

“I didn’t expect you to kick, Rod. Nevertheless…well, I don’t know how much politicking you’ve seen, Rod. I haven’t seen much myself, except in church matters and we Quakers don’t do things that way; we wait until the Spirit moves. But, despite all the rigamarole, that was a

slick piece of railroading. This morning you would have been elected overwhelmingly; tonight you did not stand a chance."

"The point is," Jimmy put in, "do we stand for it?"

"What can we do?"

"What can we do? We don't have to stay here. We've still got our own group; we can walk out and find another place…a bigger cave maybe."

"Yes, sir!" agreed Caroline. "Right tonight."

Rod thought about it. The idea was tempting; they didn't need the others…guys like Nielsen—and Cowper. The discovery that his friends were loyal to him, loyal to the extent that they would consider exile rather than let him down choked him up. He turned to Jacqueline. "How about you, Jackie?"

"We're partners, Rod. Always."

"Bob—do you want to do this? You and Carmen?"

"Yes. Well…"

"'Well' what?"

"Rod, we're sticking with you. This election is all very well—but you took us in when we needed it and teamed with us. We'll never forget it. Furthermore I think that you make a sounder team captain than Cowper is likely to make. But there is one thing."

"Yes."

"If you decide that we leave, Carmen and I will appreciate it if you put it off a day."

"Why?" demanded Caroline. "Now is the time."

"Well—they've set this up as a formal colony, a village with a mayor. Everybody knows that a regularly elected mayor can perform weddings."

"Oh!" said Caroline. "Pardon my big mouth."

"Carmen and I can take care of the religious end—it's not very complicated in our church. But, just in case we ever are rescued, we would like it better and our folks would like it if the civil requirements were all perfectly regular and legal. You see?"

Rod nodded. "I see."

"But if you say to leave tonight…"

"I don't," Rod answered with sudden decision. "We'll stay and get you two properly married. Then—"

"Then we all shove off in a shower of rice," Caroline finished.

"Then we'll see. Cowper may turn out to be a good mayor. We won't leave just because I lost an election." He looked around at their faces. "But…but I certainly do thank you. I—"

He could not go on. Carmen stepped forward and kissed him quickly. “Goodnight, Rod. Thanks.”

9

“A Joyful Omen”

MAYOR COWPER GOT OFF TO A GOOD START. He approved, took over, and embellished a suggestion that Carmen and Bob should have their own quarters. He suspended work on the wall and set the whole village to constructing a honeymoon cottage. Not until his deputy, Roy Kilroy, reminded him did he send out hunting parties.

He worked hard himself, having set the wedding for that evening and having decreed that the building must be finished by sundown. Finished it was by vandalizing part of the wall to supply building stone when the supply ran short Construction was necessarily simple since they had no tools, no mortar but clay mud, no way to cut timbers. It was a stone box as tall as a man and a couple of meters square, with a hole for a door. The roof was laid up from the heaviest poles that could be cut from a growth upstream of giant grass much like bamboo—the colonists simply called it “bamboo.” This was thatched and plastered with mud; it sagged badly.

But it was a house and even had a door which could be closed—a woven grass mat stiffened with bamboo. It neither hinged nor locked but it filled the hole and could be held in place with a stone and a pole. The floor was clean sand covered with fresh broad leaves.

As a doghouse for a St. Bernard it would have been about right; as a dwelling for humans it was not much. But it was better than that which most human beings had enjoyed through the history and prehistory of the race. Bob and Carmen did not look at it critically.

When work was knocked off for lunch Rod self-consciously sat down near a group around Cowper. He had wrestled with his conscience for a long time in the night and had decided that the only thing to do was to eat sour grapes and pretend to like them. He could start by not avoiding Cowper.

Margery Chung was cook for the day; she cut Rod a chunk of scorched meat. He thanked her and started to gnaw it. Cowper was talking. Rod was not trying to overhear but there seemed to be no reason not to listen.

“—which is the only way we will get the necessary discipline into the group. I’m sure you agree.” Cowper glanced up, caught Rod’s eye, looked annoyed, then grinned. “Hello, Rod.”

“Hi, Grant.”

“Look, old man, we’re having an executive committee meeting. Would you mind finding somewhere else to eat lunch?”

Rod stood up blushing. “Oh! Sure.”

Cowper seemed to consider it. “Nothing private, of course—just getting things done. On second thought maybe you should sit in and give us your advice.”

“Huh? Oh, no! I didn’t know anything was going on.” Rod started to move away.

Cowper did not insist. “Got to keep working, lots to do. See you later, then. Any time.” He grinned and turned away.

Rod wandered off, feeling conspicuous. He heard himself hailed and turned gratefully, joined Jimmy Throxton. “Come outside the wall,” Jimmy said quietly. “The Secret Six are having a picnic. Seen the happy couple?”

“You mean Carmen and Bob?”

“Know any other happy couples? Oh, there they are—staring hungrily at their future mansion. See you outside.”

Rod went beyond the wall, found Jacqueline and Caroline sitting near the water and eating. From habit he glanced around, sizing up possible cover for carnivores and figuring escape routes back into the kraal, but his alertness was not conscious as there seemed no danger in the open so near other people. He joined the girls and sat down on a rock. “Hi, kids.”

“Hello, Rod.”

“H’lo, Roddie,” Caroline seconded. “What news on the Rialto?”

“None, I guess. Say, did Grant appoint an executive committee last night?”

“He appointed about a thousand committees but no executive committee unless he did it after we adjourned. Why an executive committee? This gang needs one the way I need a bicycle.”

“Who is on it, Rod?” asked Jacqueline.

Rod thought back and named the faces he had seen around Cowper. She looked thoughtful. “Those are his own special buddies from Teller U.”

“Yes, I guess so.”

“I don’t like it,” she answered.

“What’s the harm?”

“Maybe none…maybe. It is about what we could expect. But I’d feel better if all the classes were on it, not just that older bunch. You know.”

“Shucks, Jack, you’ve got to give him some leeway.”

“I don’t see why,” put in Caroline. “That bunch you named are the same ones Hizzonor appointed as chairmen of the other committees.

It's a tight little clique. You notice none of us unsavory characters got named to any important committee—I'm on waste disposal and camp sanitation, Jackie is on food preparation, and you aren't on any. You should have been on the constitution, codification, and organization committee, but he made himself chairman and left you out. Add it up."

Rod did not answer. Caroline went on, "I'll add it if you won't. First thing you know there will be a nominating committee. Then we'll find that only those of a certain age, say twenty-one, can hold office. Pretty soon that executive committee will turn into a senate (called something else, probably) with a veto that can be upset only by a three-quarters majority that we will never get. That's the way my Uncle Phil would have rigged it."

"Your Uncle Phil?"

"Boy, there was a politician! I never liked him—he had kissed so many babies his lips were puckered. I used to hide when he came into our house. But I'd like to put him up against Hizzonor. It'ud be a battle of dinosaurs. Look, Rod, they've got us roped and tied; I say we should fade out right after the wedding." She turned to Jacqueline. "Right… pardner?"

"Sure…if Rod says so."

"Well, I don't say so. Look, Carol, I don't like the situation. To tell the truth…well, I was pretty sour at being kicked out of the captaincy. But I can't let the rest of you pull out on that account. There aren't enough of us to form another colony, not safely."

"Why, Roddie, there are three times as many people still back in those trees as there are here in camp. This time we'll build up slowly and be choosy about whom we take. Six is a good start. We'll get by."

"Not six, Carol. Four."

"Huh? Six! We shook on it last night before Jimmy woke you."

Rod shook his head. "Carol, how can we expect Bob and Carmen to walk out…right after the rest have made them a wedding present of a house of their own?"

"Well…darn it, we'd build them another house!"

"They would go with us, Carol—but it's too much to ask."

"I think," Jacqueline said grudgingly, "that Rod has something, Carol."

The argument was ended by the appearance of Bob, Carmen, and Jimmy. They had been delayed, explained Jimmy, by the necessity of inspecting the house. "As if I didn't know every rock in it. Oh, my back!"

"I appreciate it, Jim," Carmen said softly. "I'll rub your back."

"Sold!" Jimmy lay face down.

“Hey!” protested Caroline. “I carried more rocks than he did. Mostly he stood around and bossed.”

“Supervisory work is exceptionally tiring,” Jimmy said smugly. “You get Bob to rub your back.”

Neither got a back rub as Roy Kilroy called to them from the wall. “Hey! You down there—lunch hour is over. Let’s get back to work.”

“Sorry, Jimmy. Later.” Carmen turned away.

Jimmy scrambled to his feet. “Bob, Carmen—don’t go ’way yet. I want to say something.”

They stopped. Rod waved to Kilroy. “With you in a moment!” He turned back to the others.

Jimmy seemed to have difficulty in choosing words. “Uh, Carmen… Bob. The future Baxters. You know we think a lot of you. We think it’s swell that you are going to get married—every family ought to have a marriage. But…well, shopping isn’t what it might be around here and we didn’t know what to get you. So we talked it over and decided to give you this. It’s from all of us. A wedding present.” Jimmy jammed a hand in his pocket, hauled out his dirty, dog-eared playing cards and handed them to Carmen.

Bob Baxter looked startled. “Gosh, Jimmy, we can’t take your cards —your *only* cards.”

“I—we want you to have them.”

“But—”

“Be quiet, Bob!” Carmen said and took the cards. “Thank you, Jimmy. Thank you very much. Thank you all.” She looked around. “Our getting married isn’t going to make any difference, you know. It’s still one family. We’ll expect you all…to come play cards…at our house just as—” She stopped suddenly and started to cry, buried her head on Bob’s shoulder. He patted it. Jimmy looked as if he wanted to cry and Rod felt nakedly embarrassed.

They started back, Carmen with an arm around Jimmy and the other around her betrothed. Rod hung back with the other two. “Did Jimmy,” he whispered, “say anything to either of you about this?”

“No,” Jacqueline answered.

“Not me,” Caroline agreed. “I was going to give ’em my stew pan, but now I’ll wait a day or two.” Caroline’s “bag of rocks” had turned out to contain an odd assortment for survival—among other things, a thin-page diary, a tiny mouth organ, and a half-litre sauce pan. She produced other unlikely but useful items from time to time. Why she had picked them and how she had managed to hang on to them after she discarded the bag were minor mysteries, but, as Deacon Matson had often told the class: “Each to his own methods. Survival is an art, not a science.” It was undeniable that she had appeared at the cave healthy,

well fed, and with her clothing surprisingly neat and clean in view of the month she had been on the land.

"They won't expect you to give up your stew pan, Caroline."

"I can't use it now that the crowd is so big, and they can set up housekeeping with it. Anyhow, I want to."

"I'm going to give her two needles and some thread. Bob made her leave her sewing kit behind in favor of medical supplies. But I'll wait a while, too."

"I haven't anything I can give them," Rod said miserably.

Jacqueline turned gentle eyes on him. "You can make them a water skin for their house, Rod," she said softly. "They would like that. We can use some of my Kwik-Kure so that it will last."

Rod cheered up at once. "Say, that's a swell idea!"

"We are gathered here," Grant Cowper said cheerfully, "to join these two people in the holy bonds of matrimony. I won't give the usual warning because we all know that no impediment exists to this union. In fact it is the finest thing that could happen to our little community, a joyful omen of things to come, a promise for the future, a guarantee that we are firmly resolved to keep the torch of civilization, now freshly lighted on this planet, forever burning in the future. It means that—"

Rod stopped listening. He was standing at the groom's right as best man. His duties had not been onerous but now he found that he had an overwhelming desire to sneeze. He worked his features around, then in desperation rubbed his upper lip violently and overcame it. He sighed silently and was glad for the first time that Grant Cowper had this responsibility. Grant seemed to know the right words and he did not.

The bride was attended by Caroline Mshiyeni. Both girls carried bouquets of a flame-colored wild bloom. Caroline was in shorts and shirt as usual and the bride was dressed in the conventional blue denim trousers and overshirt. Her hair was arranged *en brosse*; her scrubbed face shone in the firelight and she was radiantly beautiful.

"Who giveth this woman?"

Jimmy Throxton stepped forward and said hoarsely, "I do!"

"The ring, please."

Rod had it on his little finger; with considerable fumbling he got it off. It was a Ponce de Leon senior-class ring, borrowed from Bill Kennedy. He handed it to Cowper.

"Carmen Eleanora, do you take this man to be your lawfully wedded husband, to have and to hold, for better and for worse, in sickness and in health, till death do you part?"

"I do."

"Robert Edward, do you take this woman to be your lawfully

wedded wife? Will you keep her and cherish her, cleaving unto her only, until death do you part?"

"I do. I mean, I will. Both."

"Take her hand in yours. Place the ring on her finger. Repeat after me—"

Rod's sneeze was coming back again; he missed part of it.

"—so, by authority vested in me as duly elected Chief Magistrate of this sovereign community, I pronounce you man and wife! Kiss her, chum, before I beat you to it."

Carol and Jackie both were crying; Rod wondered what had gone wrong. He missed his turn at kissing the bride, but she turned to him presently, put an arm around his neck and kissed him. He found himself shaking hands with Bob very solemnly. "Well, I guess that does it. Don't forget you are supposed to carry her through the door."

"I won't forget."

"Well, you told me to remind you. Uh, may the Principle bless you both."

10
“I So Move”

THERE WAS NO MORE TALK OF LEAVING. Even Caroline dropped the subject.

But on other subjects talk was endless. Cowper held a town meeting every evening. These started with committee reports—the committee on food resources and natural conservation, the committees on artifacts and inventory, on waste disposal and camp sanitation, on exterior security, on human resources and labor allotment, on recruitment and immigration, on conservation of arts and sciences, on constitution, codification, and justice, on food preparation, on housing and city planning—

Cowper seemed to enjoy the endless talk and Rod was forced to admit that the others appeared to have a good time, too—he surprised himself by discovering that he too looked forward to the evenings. It was the village’s social life, the only recreation. Each session produced wordy battles, personal remarks and caustic criticisms; what was lacking in the gentlemanly formality found in older congresses was made up in spice. Rod liked to sprawl on the ground with his ear near Jimmy Throxton and listen to Jimmy’s slanderous asides about the intelligence, motives, and ancestry of each speaker. He waited for Caroline’s disorderly heckling.

But Caroline was less inclined to heckle now; Cowper had appointed her Historian on discovering that she owned a diary and could take shorthand. “It is extremely important,” he informed her in the presence of the village, “that we have a full record of these pioneer days for posterity. You’ve been writing in your diary every day?”

“Sure. That’s what it’s for.”

“Good! From here on it will be an official account. I want you to record the important events of each day.”

“All right. It doesn’t make the tiniest bit of difference, I do anyhow.”

“Yes, yes, but in greater detail. I want you to record our proceedings, too. Historians will treasure this document, Carol.”

“I’ll bet!”

Cowper seemed lost in thought. “How many blank leaves left in your diary?”

“Couple of hundred, maybe.”

“Good! That solves a problem I had been wondering about. Uh, we

will have to requisition half of that supply for official use—public notices, committee transactions, and the like. You know."

Caroline looked wide-eyed. "That's a lot of paper, isn't it? You had better send two or three big husky boys to carry it."

Cowper looked puzzled. "You're joking."

"Better make it *four* big huskies. I could probably manage three… and somebody is likely to get hurt."

"Now, see here, Caroline, it is just a temporary requisition, in the public interest. Long before you need all of your diary we will devise other writing materials."

"Go ahead and devise! That's *my* diary."

Caroline sat near Cowper, diary in her lap and style in her hand, taking notes. Each evening she opened proceedings by reading the minutes of the previous meeting. Rod asked her if she took down the endless debates.

"Goodness no!"

"I wondered. It seemed to me that you would run out of paper. Your minutes are certainly complete."

She chuckled. "Roddie, want to know what I really write down? Promise not to tell."

"Of course I won't."

"When I 'read the minutes' I just reach back in my mind and recall what the gabble was the night before—I've got an awfully good memory. But what I actually dirty the paper with…well, here—" She took her diary from a pocket. "Here's last night: 'Hizzoner called us to disorder at half-past burping time. The committee on cats and dogs reported. No cats, no dogs. The shortage was discussed. We adjourned and went to sleep, those who weren't already.'"

Rod grinned. "A good thing Grant doesn't know shorthand."

"Of course, if anything *real* happens, I put it down. But not the talk, talk, talk."

Caroline was not adamant about not sharing her supply of paper when needed. A marriage certificate, drawn up in officialese by Howard Goldstein, a Teller law student, was prepared for the Baxters and signed by Cowper, the couple themselves, and Rod and Caroline as witnesses. Caroline decorated it with flowers and turtle doves before delivering it.

There were others who seemed to feel that the new government was long on talk and short on results. Among them was Bob Baxter, but the Quaker couple did not attend most of the meetings. But when Cowper had been in office a week, Shorty Dumont took the floor after the endless committee reports:

"Mr. Chairman!"

"Can you hold it, Shorty? I have announcements to make before we get on to new business."

"This is still about committee reports. When does the committee on our constitution report?"

"Why, I made the report myself."

"You said that a revised draft was being prepared and the report would be delayed. That's no report. What I want to know is: when do we get a permanent set-up? When do we stop floating in air, getting along from day to day on 'temporary executive notices'?"

Cowper flushed. "Do you object to my executive decisions?"

"Won't say that I do, won't say that I don't. But Rod was let out and you were put in on the argument that we needed constitutional government, not a dictatorship. That's why I voted for you. All right, where's our laws? When do we vote on them?"

"You must understand," Cowper answered carefully, "that drawing up a constitution is not done overnight. Many considerations are involved."

"Sure, sure—but it's time we had some notion of what sort of a constitution you are cooking up. How about a bill of rights? Have you drawn up one?"

"All in due time."

"Why wait? For a starter let's adopt the Virginia Bill of Rights as article one. I so move."

"You're out of order. Anyhow we don't even have a copy of it."

"Don't let that bother you; I know it by heart. You ready, Carol? Take this down…"

"Never mind," Caroline answered. "I know it, too. I'm writing it."

"You see? These things aren't any mystery, Grant; most of us could quote it. So let's quit stalling."

Somebody yelled, "Whoopee! That's telling him, Shorty. I second the motion."

Cowper shouted for order. He went on, "This is not the time nor the place. When the committee reports, you will find that all proper democratic freedoms and safeguards have been included—modified only by the stern necessities of our hazardous position." He flashed his smile. "Now let's get on with business. I have an announcement about hunting parties. Hereafter each hunting party will be expected to—"

Dumont was still standing. "I said no more stalling, Grant. You argued that what we needed was laws, not a captain's whim. You've been throwing your weight around quite a while now and I don't see any laws. What are your duties? How much authority do you have? Are

you both the high and the low justice? Or do the rest of us have rights?"

"Shut up and sit down!"

"How long is your term of office?"

Cowper made an effort to control himself. "Shorty, if you have suggestions or, such things, you must take them up with the committee."

"Oh, slush! Give me a straight answer."

"You are out of order."

"I am *not* out of order. I'm insisting that the committee on drawing up a constitution tell us what they are doing. I won't surrender the floor until I get an answer. This is a town meeting and I have as much right to talk as anybody."

Cowper turned red. "I wouldn't be too sure," he said ominously. "Just how old are you, Shorty?"

Dumont stared at him. "Oh, so *that's* it? And the cat is out of the bag!" He glanced around. "I see quite a few here who are younger than I am. See what he's driving at, folks? Second-class citizens. He's going to stick an age limit in that so-called constitution. Aren't you, Grant? Look me in the eye and deny it."

"Roy! Dave! Grab him and bring him to order."

Rod had been listening closely; the show was better than usual. Jimmy had been adding his usual flippant commentary. Now Jimmy whispered, "That tears it. Do we choose up sides or do we fade back and watch the fun?"

Before he could answer Shorty made it clear that he needed no immediate help. He set his feet wide and snapped, "Touch me and somebody gets hurt!" He did not reach for any weapon but his attitude showed that he was willing to fight.

He went on, "Grant, I've got one thing to say, then I'll shut up." He turned and spoke to all. "You can see that we don't have any rights and we don't know where we stand—but we are already organized like a straitjacket. Committees for this, committees for that—and what good has it done? Are we better off than we were before all these half-baked committees were appointed? The wall is still unfinished, the camp is dirtier than ever, and nobody knows what he is supposed to do. Why, we even let the signal fire go out yesterday. When a roof leaks, you don't appoint a committee; you fix the leak. I say give the job back to Rod, get rid of these silly committees, and get on with fixing the leaks. Anybody with me? Make some noise!"

They made plenty of noise. The shouts may have come from less than half but Cowper could see that he was losing his grip on them. Roy Kilroy dropped behind Shorty Dumont and looked questioningly at Cowper; Jimmy jabbed Rod in the ribs and whispered, "Get set, boy."

But Cowper shook his head at Roy. “Shorty,” he said quietly, “are you through making your speech?”

“That wasn’t a speech, that was a motion. And you had better not tell me it’s out of order.”

“I did not understand your motion. State it.”

“You understood it. I’m moving that we get rid of you and put Rod back in.”

Kilroy interrupted. “Hey, Grant, he can’t do that. That’s not according to—”

“Hold it, Roy. Shorty, your motion is not in order.”

“I thought you would say that!”

“And it is really two motions. But I in not going to bother with trifles. You say people don’t like the way I’m doing things, so we’ll find out.” He went on briskly, “Is there a second to the motion?”

“Second!”

“I second it.”

“Moved and seconded. The motion is to recall me and put Rod in office. Any remarks?”

A dozen people tried to speak. Rod got the floor by outshouting the others. “Mr. Chairman, *Mr. Chairman!* Privileged question!”

“The chair recognizes Rod Walker.”

“Point of personal privilege. I have a statement to make.”

“Well? Go ahead.”

“Look, Grant, I didn’t know Shorty planned to do this. Tell him, Shorty.”

“That’s right.”

“Okay, okay,” Cowper said sourly. “Any other remarks? Don’t yell, just stick up your hands.”

“I’m not through,” insisted Rod.

“Well?”

“I not only did not know, I’m not for it. Shorty, I want you to withdraw your motion.”

“No!”

“I think you should. Grant has only had a week; you can’t expect miracles in that time—I *know*; I’ve had grief enough with this bunch of wild men. You may not like the things he’s done—I don’t myself, a lot of them. That’s to be expected. But if you let that be an excuse to run him out of office, then sure as daylight this gang will break up.”

“I’m not busting it up—he is! He may be older than I am but if he thinks that makes the least difference when it comes to having a say—

well…he'd better think twice. I'm warning him. You hear that, Grant?"

"I heard it. You misunderstood me."

"Like fun I did!"

"Shorty," Rod persisted, "will you drop this idea? I'm asking you *please*."

Shorty Dumont looked stubborn. Rod looked helplessly at Cowper, shrugged and sat down. Cowper turned away and growled, "Any more debate? You back there… Agnes? You've got the floor."

Jimmy whispered, "Why did you pull a stunt like that, Rod? Nobility doesn't suit you."

"I wasn't being noble. I knew what I was doing," Rod answered in low tones.

"You messed up your chances to be re-elected."

"Stow it." Rod listened; it appeared that Agnes Fries had more than one grievance. "Jim?"

"Huh?"

"Jump to your feet and move to adjourn."

"What? Ruin this when it's getting good? There is going to be some hair pulled… I hope."

"Don't argue; do it!—or I'll bang your heads together."

"Oh, all right. Spoilsport." Jimmy got reluctantly to his feet, took a breath and shouted, "I move we adjourn!"

Rod bounced to his feet. "SECOND THE MOTION!"

Cowper barely glanced at them. "Out of order. Sit down."

"It is *not* out of order," Rod said loudly. "A motion to adjourn is always in order, it takes precedence, and it cannot be debated. I call for the question."

"I never recognized you. This recall motion is going to be voted on if it is the last thing I do." Cowper's face was tense with anger. "Are you through, Agnes? Or do you want to discuss my table manners, too?"

"You *can't* refuse a motion to adjourn," Rod insisted. "Question! Put the question."

Several took up the shout, drowning out Agnes Fries, preventing Cowper from recognizing another speaker. Boos and catcalls rounded out the tumult.

Cowper held up both hands for silence, then called out, "It has been moved and seconded that we adjourn. Those in favor say, 'Aye.'"

"*AYE!!*"

"Opposed?"

"No," said Jimmy.

"The meeting is adjourned." Cowper strode out of the circle of firelight.

Shorty Dumont came over, planted himself in front of Rod and looked up. "A fine sort of a pal you turned out to be!" He spat on the ground and stomped off.

"Yeah," agreed Jimmy, "what gives? Schizophrenia? Your nurse drop you on your head? That noble stuff in the right doses might have put us back in business. But you didn't know when to stop."

Jacqueline had approached while Jimmy was speaking. "I wasn't pulling any tricks," Rod insisted. "I meant what I said. Kick a captain out when he's had only a few days to show himself and you'll bust us up into a dozen little groups. *I* wouldn't be able to hold them together. Nobody could."

"Bosh! Jackie, tell the man."

She frowned. "Jimmy, you're sweet, but you're not bright."

"*Et tu*, Jackie?"

"Never mind, Jackie will take care of you. A good job, Rod. By tomorrow everybody will realize it. Some of them are a little stirred up tonight."

"What I don't see," Rod said thoughtfully, "is what got Shorty stirred up in the first place?"

"Hadn't you heard? Maybe it was while you were out hunting. I didn't see it, but he got into a row with Roy, then Grant bawled him out in front of everybody. I think Shorty is self-conscious about his height," she said seriously. "He doesn't like to take orders."

"Does anybody?"

The next day Grant Cowper acted as if nothing had happened. But his manner had more of King Log and less of King Stork. Late in the afternoon he looked up Rod. "Walker? Can you spare me a few minutes?"

"Why not?"

"Let's go where we can talk." Grant led him to a spot out of earshot. They sat on the ground and Rod waited. Cowper seemed to have difficulty in finding words.

Finally he said, "Rod, I think I can depend on you." He threw in his grin, but it looked forced.

"Why?" asked Rod.

"Well…the way you behaved last night."

"So? Don't bank on it, I didn't do it for you." Rod paused, then added, "Let's get this straight. I don't like you."

For once Cowper did not grin. “That makes it mutual. I don’t like you a little bit. But we’ve got to get along…and I think I can trust you.”

“Maybe.”

“I’ll risk it.”

“I agree with every one of Shorty’s gripes. I just didn’t agree with his solution.”

Cowper gave a wry smile unlike his usual expression. For an instant Rod found himself almost liking him. “The sad part is that I agree with his gripes myself.”

“Huh?”

“Rod, you probably think I’m a stupid jerk but the fact is I do know quite a bit about theory of government. The hard part is to apply it in a…a transitional period like this. We’ve got fifty people here and not a one with any practical experience in government—not even myself. But every single one considers himself an expert. Take that bill-of-rights motion; I couldn’t let that stand. I know enough about such things to know that the rights and duties needed for a co-operative colony like this can’t be taken over word for word from an agrarian democracy, and they are still different from those necessary for an industrial republic.” He looked worried. “It is true that we had considered limiting the franchise.”

“You do and they’ll toss you in the creek!”

“I know. That’s one reason why the law committee hasn’t made a report. Another reason is—well, confound it, how can you work out things like a constitution when you practically haven’t any writing paper? It’s exasperating. But about the franchise: the oldest one of us is around twenty-two and the youngest is about sixteen. The worst of it is that the youngest are the most precocious, geniuses or near-geniuses.” Cowper looked up. “I don’t mean you.”

“Oh, no,” Rod said hastily. “I’m no genius!”

“You’re not sixteen, either. These brilliant brats worry me. ‘Bush lawyers,’ every blessed one, with always a smart answer and no sense. We thought with an age limit—a reasonable one—the older heads could act as ballast while they grow up. But it won’t work.”

“No. It won’t.”

“But what am I to *do?* That order about hunting teams not being mixed—that wasn’t aimed at teams like you and Carol, but she thought it was and gave me the very deuce. I was just trying to take care of these kids. Confound it, I wish they were all old enough to marry and settle down—the Baxters don’t give me trouble.”

“I wouldn’t worry. In a year or so ninety per cent of the colony will be married.”

“I hope so! Say…are *you* thinking about it?”

“Me?” Rod was startled. “Farthest thing from my mind.”

“Um? I thought—Never mind; I didn’t get you out here to ask about your private affairs. What Shorty had to say was hard to swallow—but I’m going to make some changes. I’m abolishing most of the committees.”

“So?”

“Yes. Blast them, they don’t *do* anything; they just produce reports. I’m going to make one girl boss cook—and one man boss hunter. I want you to be chief of police.”

“Huh? Why in Ned do you want a chief of police?”

“Well…somebody has to see that orders are carried out. You know, camp sanitation and such. Somebody has to keep the signal smoking—we haven’t accounted for thirty-seven people, aside from known dead. Somebody has to assign the night watch and check on it. The kids run hog wild if you don’t watch them. You are the one to do it.”

“Why?”

“Well…let’s be practical, Rod. I’ve got a following and so have you. We’ll have less trouble if everybody sees that we two stand together. It’s for the good of the community.”

Rod realized, as clearly as Grant did, that the group had to pull together. But Cowper was asking him to shore up his shaky administration, and Rod not only resented him but thought that Cowper was all talk and no results.

It was not just the unfinished wall, he told himself, but a dozen things. Somebody ought to search for a salt lick, every day. There ought to be a steady hunt for edible roots and berries and things, too—he, for one, was tired of an all-meat diet. Sure, you could stay healthy if you didn’t stick just to lean meat, but who wanted to eat nothing but meat, maybe for a life time? And there were those stinking hides… Grant had ordered every kill skinned, brought back for use.

“What are you going to do with those green hides?” he asked suddenly.

“Huh? Why?”

“They stink. If you put me in charge, I’m going to chuck them in the creek.”

“But we’re going to need them. Half of us are in rags now.”

“But we’re not short on hides; tanning is what we need. Those hides won’t sun-cure this weather.”

“We haven’t got tannin. Don’t be silly, Rod.”

“Then send somebody out to chew bark till they find some. You can’t mistake the puckery taste. And get rid of those hides!”

“If I do, will you take the job?”

"Maybe. You said, 'See that orders are carried out.' Whose orders? Yours? Or Kilroy's?"

"Well, both. Roy is my deputy."

Rod shook his head. "No, thanks. You've got him, so you don't need me. Too many generals, not enough privates."

"But, Rod, I *do* need you. Roy doesn't get along with the younger kids. He rubs them the wrong way."

"He rubs me the wrong way, too. Nothing doing, Grant. Besides, I don't like the title anyhow. It's silly."

"Pick your own. Captain of the Guard… City Manager. I don't care what you call it; I want you to take over the night guard and see that things run smoothly around camp—and keep an eye on the younger kids. You can do it and it's your duty."

"What will you be doing?"

"I've got to whip this code of laws into shape. I've got to think about long-range planning. Heavens, Rod, I've got a thousand things on my mind. I can't stop to settle a quarrel just because some kid has been teasing the cook. Shorty was right; we can't wait. When I give an order I want a law to back it and not have to take lip from some young snotty. But I can't do it all, I need help."

Cowper put it on grounds impossible to refuse, nevertheless…"What about Kilroy?"

"Eh? Confound it, Rod, you can't ask me to kick out somebody else to make room for *you*."

"I'm not *asking* for the job!" Rod hesitated. He needed to say that it was a matter of stubborn pride to him to back up the man who had beaten him, it was that more than any public-spiritedness. He could not phrase it, but he did know that Cowper and Kilroy were not the same case.

"I won't pull Kilroy's chestnuts out of the fire. Grant, I'll stooge for you; you were elected. But I won't stooge for a stooge."

"Rod, be reasonable! If you got an order from Roy, it would be *my* order. He would simply be carrying it out."

Rod stood up. "No deal."

Cowper got angrily to his feet and strode away.

There was no meeting that night, for the first time. Rod was about to visit the Baxters when Cowper called him aside. "You win. I've made Roy chief hunter."

"Huh?"

"You take over as City Manager, or Queen of the May, or whatever you like. Nobody has set the night watch. So get busy."

"Wait a minute! I never said I would take the job."

"You made it plain that the only thing in your way was Roy. Okay, you get your orders directly from me."

Rod hesitated. Cowper looked at him scornfully and said, "So you can't co-operate even when you have it all your own way?"

"Not that, but—"

"No 'buts.' Do you take the job? A straight answer: yes, or no."

"Uh…yes."

"Okay." Cowper frowned and added, "I almost wish you had turned it down."

"That makes two of us."

Rod started to set the guard and found that every boy he approached was convinced that he had had more than his share of watches. Since the exterior security committee had kept no records—indeed, had had no way to—it was impossible to find out who was right and who was shirking. "Stow it!" he told one. "Starting tomorrow we'll have an alphabetical list, straight rotation. I'll post it even if we have to scratch it on a rock." He began to realize that there was truth in what Grant had said about the difficulty of getting along without writing paper.

"Why don't you put your pal Baxter on watch?"

"Because the Mayor gave him two weeks honeymoon, as you know. Shut up the guff. Charlie will be your relief; make sure you know where he sleeps."

"I think I'll get married. I could use two weeks of loafing."

"I'll give you five to one you can't find a girl that far out of her mind. You're on from midnight to two."

Most of them accepted the inevitable once they were assured of a square deal in the future, but Peewee Schneider, barely sixteen and youngest in the community, stood on his "rights"—he had stood a watch the night before, he did not rate another for at least three nights, and nobody could most colorfully make him.

Rod told Peewee that he would either stand his watch, or Rod would slap his ears loose—and then he would still stand his watch. To which he added that if he heard Peewee use that sort of language around camp again he would wash Peewee's mouth out with soap.

Schneider shifted the argument. "Yah! Where are you going to find soap?"

"Until we get some, I'll use sand. You spread that word, Peewee: no more rough language around camp. We're going to be civilized if it kills us. Four to six, then, and show Kenny where you sleep." As he left Rod made a mental note that they should collect wood ashes and fat; while he had only a vague idea of how to make soap probably someone

knew how…and soap was needed for other purposes than curbing foul-mouthed pip squeaks. He had felt a yearning lately to be able to stand upwind of himself…he had long ago thrown away his socks.

Rod got little sleep. Everytime he woke he got up and inspected the guard, and twice he was awakened by watchmen who thought they saw something prowling outside the circle of firelight. Rod was not sure, although it did seem once that he could make out a large, long shape drifting past in the darkness. He stayed up a while each time, another gun in case the prowler risked the wall or the fires in the gap. He felt great temptation to shoot at the prowling shadows, but suppressed it. To carry the attack to the enemy would be to squander their scanty ammunition without making a dent in the dangerous beasts around them. There were prowlers every night; they had to live with it.

He was tired and cranky the next morning and wanted to slip away after breakfast and grab a nap in the cave. He had not slept after four in the morning, but had checked on Peewee Schneider at frequent intervals. But there was too much to do; he promised himself a nap later and sought out Cowper instead. “Two or three things on my mind, Grant.”

“Spill it.”

“Any reason not to put girls on watch?”

“Eh? I don’t think it’s a good idea.”

“Why not? These girls don’t scream at a mouse. Everyone of them stayed alive by her own efforts at least a month before she joined up here. Ever seen Caroline in action?”

“Mmm…no.”

“You should. It’s a treat. Sudden death in both hands, and eyes in the back of her head. If she were on watch, I would sleep easy. How many men do we have now?”

“Uh, twenty-seven, with the three that came in yesterday.”

“All right, out of twenty-seven who doesn’t stand watch?”

“Why, everybody takes his turn.”

“You?”

“Eh? Isn’t that carrying it pretty far? I don’t expect you to take a watch; you run it and check on the others.”

“That’s two off. Roy Kilroy?”

“Uh, look, Rod, you had better figure that he is a department head as chief hunter and therefore exempt. You know why—no use looking for trouble.”

“I know, all right. Bob Baxter is off duty, too.”

“Until next week.”

“But this is this week. The committee cut the watch down to one at

a time; I'm going to boost it to two again. Besides that I want a sergeant of the guard each night. He will be on all night and sleep all next day… then I don't want to put him on for a couple of days. You see where that leaves me? I need twelve watchstanders every night; I have less than twenty to draw from."

Cowper looked worried. "The committee didn't think we had to have more than one guard at a time."

"Committee be hanged!" Rod scratched his scars and thought about shapes in the dark. "Do you want me to run this the way I think it has to be run? Or shall I just go through the motions?"

"Well…"

"One man alone either gets jittery and starts seeing shadows—or he dopes off and is useless. I had to wake one last night—I won't tell you who; I scared him out of his pants; he won't do it again. I say we need a real guard, strong enough in case of trouble to handle things while the camp has time to wake up. But if you want it your way, why not relieve me and put somebody else in?"

"No, no, you keep it. Do what you think necessary."

"Okay, I'm putting the girls on. Bob and Carmen, too, And *you*."

"Huh?"

"And me. And Roy Kilroy. Everybody. That's the only way you will get people to serve without griping; that way you will convince them that it is serious, a first obligation, even ahead of hunting."

Cowper picked at a hangnail, "Do you honestly think I should stand watch? And you?"

"I do. It would boost morale seven hundred percent. Besides that, it would be a good thing, uh, politically."

Cowper glanced up, did not smile. "You've convinced me. Let me know when it's my turn."

"Another thing. Last night there was barely wood to keep two fires going."

"Your problem. Use anybody not on the day's hunting or cooking details."

"I will. You'll hear some beefs. Boss, those were minor items; now I come to the major one. Last night I took a fresh look at this spot. I don't like it, not as a permanent camp. We've been lucky."

"Eh? Why?"

"This place is almost undefendable. We've got a stretch over fifty meters long between shale and water on the upstream side. Downstream isn't bad, because we build a fire in the bottleneck. But upstream we have walled off less than half and we need a lot more stakes behind the wall. Look," Rod added, pointing, "you could drive

an army through there—and last night I had only two little bitty fires. We ought to finish that wall."

"We will."

"But we ought to make a real drive to find a better place. This is makeshift at best. Before you took over I as trying to find more caves—but I didn't have time to explore very far. Ever been to Mesa Verde?"

"In Colorado? No."

"Cliff dwellings, you've seen pictures. Maybe somewhere up or down stream—more likely down—we will find pockets like those at Mesa Verde where we can build homes for the whole colony. You ought to send a team out for two weeks or more, searching. I volunteer for it."

"Maybe. But you can't go; I need you."

"In a week I'll have this guard duty lined up so that it will run itself. Bob Baxter can relieve me; they respect him. Uh…" He thought for a moment. Jackie? Jimmy? "I'll team with Carol."

"Rod, I told you I want you here. But are you and Caroline planning to marry?"

"Huh? What gave you that notion?"

"Then you can't team with her in any case. We are trying to re-introduce amenities around here."

"Now see here, Cowper!"

"Forget it."

"Unh…all right. But the first thing—the very first—is to finish that wall. I want to put everybody to work right away."

"Mmm…" Cowper said. "I'm sorry. You can't."

"Why not?"

"Because we are going to build a house today. Bill Kennedy and Sue Briggs are getting married tonight."

"Huh? I hadn't heard."

"I guess you are the first to hear. They told me about it privately, at breakfast."

Rod was not surprised, as Bill and Sue preferred each other's company. "Look, do they have to get married tonight? That wall is urgent, Grant; I'm telling you."

"Don't be so intense, Rod. You can get along a night or two with bigger fires. Remember, there are human values more important than material values."

11
The Beach of Bones

"*July 29*—BILL AND SUE GOT MARRIED TONIGHT. Hizzoner never looked lovelier. He made a mighty pretty service out of it—I cried and so did the other girls. If that boy could *do* the way he can talk! I played Mendelssohn's Wedding March on my harmonica with tears running down my nose and gumming up the reeds—that's a touch I wanted to put into darling Carmen's wedding but I couldn't resist being bridesmaid. The groom got stuck carrying his lady fair over the threshold of their 'house'—if I may call it that—and had to put her down and shove her in ahead of him. The ceiling is lower than it ought to be which is why he got stuck, because we ran out of rock and Roddie raised Cain when we started to use part of the wall. Hizzoner was leading the assault on the wall and both of them got red in the face and shouted at each other. But Hizzoner backed down after Roddie got him aside and said something—Bill was pretty sore at Roddie but Bob sweet-talked him and offered to swap houses and Roddie promised Bill that we would take the roof off and bring the walls up higher as soon as the wall is finished. That might not be as soon as he thinks, though—usable rock is getting hard to find. I've broken all my nails trying to pry out pieces we could use. But I agree with Roddie that we ought to finish that wall and I sleep a lot sounder now that he is running the watch and I'll sleep sounder yet when that wall is tight and the pincushion back of it finished. Of course we girls sleep down at the safe end but who wants to wake up and find a couple of our boys missing? It is not as if we had them to spare, bless their silly little hearts. Nothing like a man around the house, Mother always said, to give a home that lived-in look.

"*July 30*—I'm not going to write in this unless something happens. Hizzoner talks about making papyrus like the Egyptians but I'll believe it when I see it.

"*Aug 5*—I was sergeant of the guard last night and Roddie was awake practically all night. I turned in after breakfast and slept until late afternoon—when I woke up there was Roddie, red-eyed and cross, yelling for more rocks and more firewood. Sometimes Roddie is a little hard to take.

"*Aug 9*—the salt lick Alice found is closer than the one Shorty found last week, but not as good.

"*Aug 14*—Jackie finally made up her mind to marry Jim and I think Roddie is flabbergasted—but I could have told him a month ago. Roddie is stupid about such things. I see another house & wall crisis coming and Roddie will get a split personality because he will want Jimmy and Jacqueline to have a house right away and the only decent stone within reach is built into the wall.

"*Aug 15*—Jimmy and Jackie, Agnes and Curt, were married today in a beautiful double ceremony. The Throxtons have the Baxter house temporarily and the Pulvermachers have the Kennedy's doll house while we partition the cave into two sets of married quarters and a storeroom.

"*Sep 1*—the roots I dug up didn't poison me, so I served a mess of them tonight. The shield from power pack of that Thunderbolt gun we salvaged—Johann's, it must have been—made a big enough boiler to cook a little helping for everybody. The taste was odd, maybe because Agnes had been making soap in it—it wasn't very good soap, either. I'm going to call these things yams because they look like yams although they taste more like parsnips. There are a lot of them around. Tomorrow I in going to try boiling them with greens, a strip of side meat, and plenty of salt. Yum, yum! I'm going to bake them in ashes, too.

"*Sep 16*—Chad Ames and Dick Burke showed up with their tails tucked in; Hizzoner got soft-hearted and let em stay. They say Jock McGowan is crazy. I can believe it.

"*Sep 28*—Philip Schneider died today, hunting. Roy carried him in, but he was badly clawed and lost a lot of blood and was D.O.A. Roy resigned as boss hunter and Hizzoner appointed Cliff. Roy is broken up about it but nobody blames him. The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away. Blessed be the Name of the Lord.

"*Oct 7*—I've decided to marry M.

"*Oct 10*—seems I was mistaken—M. is going to marry Margery Chung. Well, they are nice kids and if we ever get out of this I'll be glad I'm single since I want to buck for a commission in the Amazons. Note: be a little more standoffish, Caroline. Well, *try!*

"*Oct 20*—Carmen????

"*Oct 21*—Yes.

"*Nov 1*—well Glory be! I'm the new *City Manager*. Little Carol, the girl with two left feet. Just a couple of weeks, temporary and acting while Roddie is away, but say 'sir' when you speak to me. Hizzoner

finally let Roddie make the down-river survey he has been yipping about, accompanying it with a slough of advice and injunctions that Roddie will pay no attention to once he is out of sight—if I know Roddie. It's a two-man team and Roddie picked Roy as his teamer. They left this morning.

"*Nov 5*—being City Manager is not all marshmallow sundae. I wish Roddie would get back.

"*Nov 11*—Hizzoner wants me to copy off in here the 'report of the artifacts committee'! Mick Mahmud has been keeping it in his head which strikes me as a good place. But Hizzoner has been very jumpy since Roddie and Roy left, so I guess I will humor him—here it is:

"12 spare knives (besides one each for everybody)
"53 firearms and guns of other sorts—but only about half of them with even one charge left.
"6 Testaments
"2 Peace of the Flame
"1 Koran
"1 Book of Mormon
"1 Oxford Book of English Verse, Centennial Edition
"1 steel bow and 3 hunting arrows
"1 boiler made from a wave shield and quite a bit of metal and plastic junk (worth its weight in uranium, I admit) from the Thunderbolt Jackie salvaged.
"1 stew pan (Carmen's)
"1 pack playing cards with the nine of hearts missing
"13 matches, any number of pocket flamers no longer working, and 27 burning glasses
"1 small hand ax
"565 meters climbing line, some of it chopped up for other uses
"91 fishhooks (and no fish fit to eat!)
"61 pocket compasses, some of them broken
"19 watches that still run (4 of them adjusted to our day)
"2 bars of scented soap that Theo has been hoarding
"2 boxes Kwik-Kure and part of a box of Tan-Fast
"Several kilos of oddments that I suppose we will find a use for but I won't list. Mick has a mind like a pack rat.

"Lots of things we have made and can make more of—pots, bows and arrows, hide scrapers, a stone-age mortar & pestle we can grind seeds on if you don't mind grit in your teeth, etc. Hizzoner says the Oxford Verse is the most valuable thing we have and I agree, but not for his reasons. He wants me to cover all the margins with shorthand, recording all special knowledge that any of us have—everything from math to pig-raising. Cliff says go ahead as long as we don't deface the verses. I don't see when I'm going to find time. I've hardly been out of the settlement since Roddie left and sleep is something I just hear

about.

"*Nov 13*—only two more days. 'For this relief, much thanks…'

"*Nov 16*—I didn't think they would be on time.

"*Nov 21*—We finally adopted our constitution and basic code today, the first town meeting we've had in weeks. It covers the flyleaves of two Testaments, Bob's and Georgia's. If anybody wants to refer to it, which I doubt, that's where to look.

"*Nov 29*—Jimmy says old Rod is too tough to kill. I hope he's right. Why, oh, why didn't I twist Hizzoner's arm and make him let me go?

"*Dec 15*—there's no use kidding ourselves any longer.

"*Dec 21*—the Throxtons and Baxters and myself and Grant gathered privately in the Baxter house tonight and Grant recited the service for the dead. Bob said a prayer for both of them and then we sat quietly for a long time, Quaker fashion. Roddie always reminded me of my brother Rickie, so I privately asked Mother to take care of him, and Roy, too—Mother had a lap big enough for three, any time.

"Grant hasn't made a public announcement; officially they are just 'overdue.'

"*Dec 25*—Christmas"

Rod and Roy traveled light and fast downstream, taking turns leading and covering. Each carried a few kilos of salt meat but they expected to eat off the land. In addition to game they now knew of many edible fruits and berries and nuts; the forest was a free cafeteria to those who knew it. They carried no water since they expected to follow the stream. But they continued to treat the water with respect; in addition to ichthyosaurs that sometimes pulled down a drinking buck there were bloodthirsty little fish that took very small bites—but they traveled in schools and could strip an animal to bones in minutes.

Rod carried both Lady Macbeth and Colonel Bowie; Roy Kilroy carried his Occam's Razor and a knife borrowed from Carmen Baxter. Roy had a climbing rope wrapped around his waist. Each had a hand gun strapped to his hip but these were for extremity; one gun had only three charges. But Roy carried Jacqueline Throxton's air pistol, with freshly envenomed darts; they expected it to save hours of hunting, save time for travel.

Three days downstream they found a small cave, found living in it a forlorn colony of five girls. They powwowed, then headed on down as the girls started upstream to find the settlement. The girls had told them of a place farther down where the creek could be crossed. They found

it, a wide rocky shallows with natural stepping stones…then wasted two days on the far side before crossing back.

By the seventh morning they had found no cave other than one the girls had occupied. Rod said to Roy, “Today makes a week. Grant said to be back in two weeks.”

“That’s what the man said. Yes, sir!”

“No results.”

“Nope. None.”

“We ought to start back.”

Roy did not answer. Rod said querulously, “Well, what do you think?”

Kilroy was lying down, watching the local equivalent of an ant. He seemed in no hurry to do anything else. Finally he answered, “Rod, you are bossing this party. Upstream, downstream—just tell me.”

“Oh, go soak your head.”

“On the other hand, a bush lawyer like Shorty might question Grant’s authority to tell us to return at a given time. He might use words like ‘free citizen’ and ‘sovereign autonomy.’ Maybe he’s got something—this neighborhood looks awfully far ‘West of the Pecos.’”

“Well…we could stretch it a day, at least?. We won’t be taking that side trip going back.”

“Obviously. Now, if I were leading the party—but I’m not.”

“Cut the double talk! I asked for advice.”

“Well, I say we are here to find caves, not to keep a schedule.”

Rod quit frowning. “Up off your belly. Let’s go.”

They headed downstream.

The terrain changed from forest valley to canyon country as the stream cut through a plateau. Game became harder to find and they used some of their salt meat. Two days later they came to the first of a series of bluffs carved eons earlier into convolutions, pockets, blank dark eyes. “This looks like it.”

“Yes,” agreed Roy. He looked around. “It might be even better farther down.”

“It might be.”

They went on.

In time the stream widened out, there were no more caves, and the canyons gave way to a broad savannah, treeless except along the banks of the river. Rod sniffed. “I smell salt.”

“You ought to. There’s ocean over there somewhere.”

“I don’t think so.” They went on.

They avoided the high grass, kept always near the trees. The colonists had listed more than a dozen predators large enough to endanger a man, from a leonine creature twice as long as the biggest African lion down to a vicious little scaly thing which was dangerous if cornered. It was generally agreed that the leonine monster was the "stobor" they had been warned against, although a minority favored a smaller carnivore which was faster, trickier, and more likely to attack a man.

One carnivore was not considered for the honor. It was no larger than a jack rabbit, had an oversize head, a big jaw, front legs larger than hind, and no tail. It was known as "dopy joe" from the silly golliwog expression it had and its clumsy, slow movements when disturbed. It was believed to live by waiting at burrows of field rodents for supper to come out. Its skin cured readily and made a good water bag. Grassy fields such as this savannah often were thick with them.

They camped in a grove of trees by the water. Rod said, "Shall I waste a match, or do it the hard way?"

"Suit yourself. I'll knock over something for dinner."

"Watch yourself. Don't go into the grass."

"I'll work the edges. Cautious Kilroy they call me, around the insurance companies."

Rod counted his three matches, hoping there would be four, then started making fire by friction. He had just succeeded, delayed by moss that was not as dry as it should have been, when Roy returned and dropped a small carcass. "The durnedest thing happened."

The kill was a dopy joe; Rod looked at it with distaste. "Was that the best you could do? They taste like kerosene."

"Wait till I tell you. I wasn't hunting him; he was hunting *me*."

"Don't kid me!"

"Truth. I had to kill him to keep him from snapping my ankles. So I brought him in."

Rod looked at the small creature. "Never heard the like. Must be insanity in his family."

"Probably." Roy started skinning it.

Next morning they reached the sea, a glassy body untouched by tide, unruffled by wind. It was extremely briny and its shore was crusted with salt They concluded that it was probably a dead sea, not a true ocean. But their attention was not held by the body of water. Stretching away along the shore apparently to the horizon were millions on heaping millions of whitened bones. Rod stared. "Where did they all come from?"

Roy whistled softly. "Search me. But if we could sell them at five pence a metric ton, we'd be millionaires."

“Billionaires, you mean.”

“Let’s not be fussy.” They walked out along the beach, forgetting to be cautious, held by the amazing sight. There were ancient bones, cracked by sun and sea, new bones with gristle clinging, big bones of the giant antelope the colonists never hunted, tiny bones of little buck no larger than terriers, bones without number of all sorts. But there were no carcasses.

They inspected the shore for a couple of kilometers, awed by the mystery. When they turned they knew that they were turning back not just to camp but to head home. This was as far as they could go.

On the trip out they had not explored the caves. On their way back Rod decided that they should try to pick the best place for the colony, figuring game, water supply, and most importantly, shelter and ease of defense.

They were searching a series of arched galleries water-carved in sandstone cliff. The shelf of the lowest gallery was six or seven meters above the sloping stand of soil below. The canyon dropped rapidly here; Rod could visualize a flume from upstream, bringing running water right to the caves…not right away, but when they had time to devise tools and cope with the problems. Someday, someday—but in the meantime here was plenty of room for the colony in a spot which almost defended itself. Not to mention, he added, being in out of the rain.

Roy was the better Alpinist; he inched up, flat to the rock, reached the shelf and threw down his line to Rod—snaked him up quickly. Rod got an arm over the edge, scrambled to his knees, stood up—and gasped, “What the deuce!”

“That,” said Roy, “is why I kept quiet. I thought you would think I was crazy.”

“I think we both are.” Rod stared around. Filling the depth of the gallery, not seen from below, was terrace on terrace of cliff dwellings.

They were not inhabited, nor had they ever been by men. Openings which must have been doors were no higher than a man’s knee, not wide enough for shoulders. But it was clear that they were dwellings, not merely formations carved by water. There were series of rooms arranged in half a dozen low stories from floor to ceiling of the gallery. The material was a concrete of dried mud, an adobe, used with wood.

But there was nothing to suggest what had built them. Roy started to stick his head into an opening; Rod shouted, “Hey! Don’t do that!”

“Why not? It’s abandoned.”

“You don’t know what might be inside. Snakes, maybe.”

“There are no snakes. Nobody’s ever seen one.”

“No…but take it easy.”

“I wish I had a torch light.”

“I wish I had eight beautiful dancing girls and a Cadillac copter. Be careful. I don’t want to walk back alone.”

They lunched in the gallery and considered the matter. “Of course they were intelligent,” Roy declared. “We may find them elsewhere. Maybe really civilized now—these look like ancient ruins.”

“Not necessarily intelligent,” Rod argued. “Bees make more complicated homes.”

“Bees don’t combine mud and wood the way these people did. Look at that lintel.”

“Birds do. I’ll concede that they were bird-brained, no more.”

“Rod, you won’t look at the evidence.”

“Where are their artifacts? Show me one ash tray marked ‘Made in Jersey City.’”

“I might find some if you weren’t so jumpy.”

“All in time. Anyhow, the fact that *they* found it safe shows that we can live here.”

“Maybe. What killed them? Or why did they go away?”

They searched two galleries after lunch, found more dwellings. The dwellers had apparently formed a very large community. The fourth gallery they explored was almost empty, containing a beginning of a hive in one corner. Rod looked it over. “We can use this. If may not be the best, but we can move the gang in and then find the best at our leisure.”

“We’re heading back?”

“Uh, in the morning. This is a good place to sleep and tomorrow we’ll travel from ‘can’ to ‘can’t’—I wonder what’s up there?” Rod was looking at a secondary shelf inside the main arch.

Roy eyed it. “I’ll let you know in a moment.”

“Don’t bother. It’s almost straight up. We’ll build ladders for spots like that.”

“My mother was a human fly, my father was a mountain goat. Watch me.”

The shelf was not much higher than his head. Roy had a hand over —when a piece of rock crumbled away. He did not fall far.

Rod ran to him. “You all right, boy?”

Roy grunted, “I guess so,” then started to get up. He yelped.

“What’s the matter?”

“My right leg. I think…ow! I think it’s broken.”

Rod examined the break, then went down to cut splints. With a

piece of the line Roy carried, used economically, for he needed most of it as a ladder, he bound the leg, padding it with leaves. It was a simple break of the tibia, with no danger of infection.

They argued the whole time. “Of course you will,” Roy was saying. “Leave me a fresh kill and what salt meat there is. You can figure some way to leave water.”

“Come back and find your chawed bones!”

“Not at all. Nothing can get at me. If you hustle, you can make it in three days.”

“Four, or five more likely. Six days to lead a party back. Then you want to go back in a stretcher? How would you like to be helpless when a stobor jumps us?”

“But I wouldn’t go back. The gang would be moving down here.”

“Suppose they do? Eleven days, more likely twelve—Roy, you didn’t just bang your shin; you banged your head, too.”

The stay in the gallery while Roy’s leg repaired was not difficult nor dangerous; it was merely tedious. Rod would have liked to explore all the caves, but the first time he was away longer than Roy thought necessary to make a kill Rod returned to find his patient almost hysterical. He had let his imagination run away, visioning Rod as dead and thinking about his own death, helpless, while he starved or died of thirst. After that Rod left him only to gather food and water. The gallery was safe from all dangers; no watch was necessary, fire was needed only for cooking. The weather was getting warmer and the daily rains dropped off.

They discussed everything from girls to what the colony needed, what could have caused the disaster that had stranded them, what they would have to eat if they could have what they wanted, and back to girls again. They did not discuss the possibility of rescue; they took it for granted that they were there to stay. They slept much of the time and often did nothing, in animal-like torpor.

Roy wanted to start back as soon as Rod removed the splints, but it took him only seconds to discover that he no longer knew how to walk. He exercised for days, then grew sulky when Rod still insisted that he was not able to travel; the accumulated irritations of invalidism spewed out in the only quarrel they had on the trip.

Rod grew as angry as he was, threw Roy’s climbing rope at him and shouted, “Go ahead! See how far you get on that gimp leg!”

Five minutes later Rod was arranging a sling, half dragging Roy, white and trembling and thoroughly subdued, back up onto the shelf. Thereafter they spent ten days getting Roy’s muscles into shape, then started back.

Shorty Dumont was the first one they ran into as they approached

the settlement. His jaw dropped and he looked scared, then he ran to greet them, ran back to alert those in camp. “Hey, everybody! They’re *back!*”

Caroline heard the shout, outdistanced the others in great flying leaps, kissed and hugged them both. “Hi, Carol,” Rod said. “What are you bawling about?”

“Oh, Roddie, you bad, *bad* boy!”

12

“It Won’t Work, Rod”

IN THE MIDST OF JUBILATION ROD HAD TIME TO NOTICE many changes. There were more than a dozen new buildings, including two long shedlike affairs of bamboo and mud. One new hut was of sunbaked brick; it had windows. Where the cooking fire had been was a barbecue pit and by it a Dutch oven. Near it a stream of water spilled out of bamboo pipe, splashed through a rawhide net, fell into a rock bowl, and was led away to the creek…he hardly knew whether to be pleased or irked at this anticipation of his own notion.

He caught impressions piecemeal, as their triumphal entry was interrupted by hugs, kisses; and bone-jarring slaps on the back, combined with questions piled on questions. “No, no trouble—except that Roy got mad and busted his leg…yeah, sure, we found what we went after; wait till you *see*…no…yes… Jackie!… Hi, Bob!—it’s good to see you, too, boy! Where’s Carmen… Hi, Grant!”

Cowper was grinning widely, white teeth splitting his beard. Rod noticed with great surprise that the man looked *old*—why, shucks, Grant wasn’t more than twenty-two, twenty-three at the most. Where did he pick up those lines?

“Rod, old boy! I don’t know whether to have you two thrown in the hoosegow or decorate your brows with laurel.”

“We got held up.”

“So it seems. Well, there is more rejoicing for the strayed lamb than for the ninety and nine. Come on up to the city hall.”

“The what?”

Cowper looked sheepish. “They call it that, so I do. Better than ‘Number Ten, Downing Street’ which it started off with. It’s just the hut where I sleep—it doesn’t belong to me,” he added. “When they elect somebody else, I’ll sleep in bachelor hall.” Grant led them toward a little building apart from the others and facing the cooking area.

The wall was gone.

Rod suddenly realized what looked strange about the upstream end of the settlement; the wall was gone completely and in its place was a thornbush barricade. He opened his mouth to make a savage comment—then realized that it really did not matter. Why kick up a row when the colony would be moving to the canyon of the Dwellers? They would never need walls again; they would be up high at night, with their ladders pulled up after them. He picked another subject.

“Grant, how in the world did you guys get the inner partitions out of those bamboo pipes?”

“Eh? Nothing to it. You tie a knife with rawhide to a thinner bamboo pole, then reach in and whittle. All it takes is patience. Waxie worked it out. But you haven’t seen anything yet. We’re going to have *iron*.”

“Huh?”

“We’ve got ore; now we are experimenting. But I do wish we could locate a seam of coal. Say, you didn’t spot any, did you?”

Dinner was a feast, a *luau*, a celebration to make the weddings look pale. Rod was given a real plate to eat on—unglazed, lopsided, ungraceful, but a plate. As he took out Colonel Bowie, Margery Chung Kinksi put a wooden spoon in his hand. “We don’t have enough to go around, but the guests of honor rate them tonight.” Rod looked at it curiously. It felt odd in his hand.

Dinner consisted of boiled greens, some root vegetables new to him, and a properly baked haunch served in thin slices. Roy and Rod were served little unleavened cakes like tortillas. No one else had them, but Rod decided that it was polite not to comment on that. Instead he made a fuss over eating bread again.

Margery dimpled. “We’ll have plenty of bread some day. Maybe next year.”

There were tart little fruits for dessert, plus a bland, tasteless sort which resembled a dwarf banana with seeds. Rod ate too much.

Grant called them to order and announced that he was going to ask the travelers to tell what they had experienced. “Let them get it all told—then they won’t have to tell it seventy times over. Come on, Rod. Let’s see your ugly face.”

“Aw, let Roy. He talks better than I do.”

“Take turns. When your voice wears out, Roy can take over.”

Between them they told it all, interrupting and supplementing each other. The colonists were awed by the beach of a billion bones, still more interested in the ruins of the Dwellers. “Rod and I are still arguing,” Roy told them. “I say that it was a civilization. He says that it could be just instinct. He’s crazy with the heat; the Dwellers were *people*. Not humans, of course, but people.”

“Then where are they now?”

Roy shrugged. “Where are the Selenites, Dora? What became of the Mithrans?”

“Roy is a romanticist,” Rod objected. “But you’ll be able to form your own opinions when we get there.”

“That’s right, Rod,” Roy agreed.

“That covers everything,” Rod went on. “The rest was just waiting while Roy’s leg healed. But it brings up the main subject. How quickly can we move? Grant, is there any reason not to start at once? Shouldn’t we break camp tomorrow and start trekking? I’ve been studying it—how to make the move, I mean—and I would say to send out an advance party at daybreak. Roy or I can lead it. We go downstream an easy day’s journey, pick a spot, make a kill, and have fire and food ready when the rest arrive. We do it again the next day. I think we can be safe and snug in the caves in five days.”

“Dibs on the advance party!”

“Me, too!”

There were other shouts but Rod could not help but realize that the response was not what he had expected. Jimmy did not volunteer and Caroline merely looked thoughtful. The Baxters he could not see; they were in shadow.

He turned to Cowper. “Well, Grant? Do you have a better idea?”

“Rod,” Grant said slowly, “your plan is okay…but you’ve missed a point.”

“Yes?”

“Why do you assume that we are going to move?”

“*Huh?* Why, that’s what we were sent for! To find a better place to live. We found it—you could hold those caves against an army. What’s the hitch? Of *course* we move!”

Cowper examined his nails. “Rod, don’t get sore. I don’t see it and I doubt if other people do. I’m not saying the spot you and Roy found is not good. It may be better than here—the way this place used to be. But we are doing all right here—and we’ve got a lot of time and effort invested. Why move?”

“Why, I told you. The caves are safe, completely safe. This spot is exposed…it’s *dangerous*.”

“Maybe. Rod, in the whole time we’ve been here, nobody has been hurt inside camp. We’ll put it to a vote, but you can’t expect us to abandon our houses and everything we have worked for to avoid a danger that may be imaginary.”

“Imaginary? Do you think that a stobor couldn’t jump that crummy barricade?” Rod demanded, pointing.

“I think a stobor would get a chest full of pointed stakes if he tried it,” Grant answered soberly. “That ‘crummy barricade’ is a highly efficient defense. Take a better look in the morning.”

“Where we were you wouldn’t need it. You wouldn’t need a night watch. Shucks, you wouldn’t need houses. Those caves are better than the best house here!”

“Probably. But, Rod, you haven’t seen all we’ve done, how much

we would have to abandon. Let's look it over in the daylight, fellow, and then talk."

"Well…no, Grant, there is only one issue: the caves are safe; this place isn't. I call for a vote."

"Easy now. This isn't a town meeting. It's a party in your honor. Let's not spoil it."

"Well… I'm sorry. But we're all here; let's vote."

"No." Cowper stood up. "There will be a town meeting on Friday as usual. Goodnight, Rod. Goodnight, Roy. We're awfully glad you're back. Goodnight all."

The party gradually fell apart. Only a few of the younger boys seemed to want to discuss the proposed move. Bob Baxter came over, put a hand on Rod and said, "See you in the morning, Rod. Bless you." He left before Rod could get away from a boy who was talking to him.

Jimmy Throxton stayed, as did Caroline. When he got the chance Rod said, "Jimmy? Where do you stand?"

"Me? You know me, pal. Look, I sent Jackie to bed; she wasn't feeling well. But she told me to tell you that we were back of you a hundred percent, always."

"Thanks. I feel better."

"See you in the morning? I want to check on Jackie."

"Sure. Sleep tight."

He was finally left with Caroline. "Roddie? Want to inspect the guard with me? You'll do it after tonight, but we figured you could use a night with no worries."

"Wait a minute. Carol…you've been acting funny."

"Me? Why, Roddie!"

"Well, maybe not. What do you think of the move? I didn't hear you pitching in."

She looked away. "Roddie," she said, "if it was just me, I'd say start tomorrow. I'd be on the advance party."

"Good! What's got into these people? Grant has them buffaloed but I can't see why." He scratched his head. "I'm tempted to make up my own party—you, me, Jimmy and Jack, the Baxters, Roy, the few who were rarin' to go tonight, and anybody else with sense enough to pound sand."

She sighed. "It won't work, Roddie."

"Huh? Why not?"

"I'll go. Some of the youngsters would go for the fun of it. Jimmy and Jack would go if you insisted…but they would beg off if you made it easy for them. The Baxters should not and I doubt if Bob would

consent. Carmen isn’t really up to such a trip.”

13
Unkillable

THE MATTER NEVER CAME TO A VOTE. Long before Friday Rod knew how a vote would go—about fifty against him, less than half that for him, with his friends voting with him through loyalty rather than conviction or possibly against him in a showdown.

He made an appeal in private to Cowper. "Grant, you've got me licked. Even Roy is sticking with you now. But you could swing them around."

"I doubt it. What you don't see, Rod, is that we have taken root. You may have found a better place…but it's too late to change. After all, you picked this spot."

"Not exactly, it…well, it just sort of happened."

"Lots of things in life just sort of happen. You make the best of them."

"That's what I'm *trying* to do! Grant, admitted that the move is hard; we could manage it. Set up way stations with easy jumps, send our biggest huskies back for what we don't want to abandon. Shucks, we could move a person on a litter if we had to—using enough guards."

"If the town votes it, I'll be for it. But I won't try to argue them into it. Look, Rod, you've got this fixed idea that this spot is dangerously exposed. The facts don't support you. On the other hand see what we have. Running water from upstream, waste disposal downstream, quarters comfortable and adequate for the climate. Salt—do you have salt there?"

"We didn't look for it—but it would be easy to bring it from the seashore."

"We've got it closer here. We've got prospects of metal. You haven't seen that ore outcropping yet, have you? We're better equipped every day; our standard of living is going up. We have a colony nobody need be ashamed of and we did it with bare hands; we were never meant to be a colony. Why throw up what we have gained to squat in caves like savages?"

Rod sighed. "Grant, this bank may be flooded in the rainy season—aside from its poor protection now."

"It doesn't look it to me, but if so, we'll see it in time. Right now we are going into the dry season. So let's talk it over a few months from now."

Rod gave up. He refused to resume as "City Manager" nor would

Caroline keep it when Rod turned it down. Bill Kennedy was appointed and Rod went to work under Cliff as a hunter, slept in the big shed upstream with the bachelors, and took his turn at night watch. The watch had been reduced to one man, whose duty was simply to tend fires. There was talk of cutting out the night fires, as fuel was no longer easy to find nearby and many seemed satisfied that the thorn barrier was enough.

Rod kept his mouth shut and stayed alert at night.

Game continued to be plentiful but became skittish. Buck did not come out of cover the way they had in rainy weather; it was necessary to search and drive them out. Carnivores seemed to have become scarcer. But the first real indication of peculiar seasonal habits of native fauna came from a very minor carnivore. Mick Mahmud returned to camp with a badly chewed foot; Bob Baxter patched him up and asked about it.

“You wouldn’t believe it.”

“Try me.”

“Well, it was just a dopy joe. I paid no attention to it, of course. Next thing I knew I was flat on my back and trying to shake it loose. He did all that to me before I got a knife into him. Then I had to cut his jaws loose.”

“Lucky you didn’t bleed to death.”

When Rod heard Mick’s story, he told Roy. Having had one experience with a dopy joe turned aggressive, Roy took it seriously and had Cliff warn all hands to watch out; they seemed to have turned nasty.

Three days later the migration of animals started.

At first it was just a drifting which appeared aimless except that it was always downstream. Animals had long since ceased to use the watering place above the settlement and buck rarely appeared in the little valley; now they began drifting into it, would find themselves baffled by the thorn fence, and would scramble out. Nor was it confined to antelope types; wingless birds with great “false faces,” rodents, rooters, types nameless to humans, all joined the migration. One of the monstrous leonine predators they called stobor approached the barricade in broad daylight, looked at it, lashed his tail, then clawed his way up the bluff and headed downstream again.

Cliff called off his hunting parties; there was no need to hunt when game walked into camp.

Rod found himself more edgy than usual that night as it grew dark. He left his seat near the barbecue pit and went over to Jimmy and Jacqueline. “What’s the matter with this place? It’s spooky.”

Jimmy twitched his shoulders. “I feel it. Maybe it’s the funny way the animals are acting. Say, did you hear they killed a joe inside camp?”

“I know what it is,” Jacqueline said suddenly. “No ‘Grand Opera.’”

“Grand Opera” was Jimmy’s name for the creatures with the awful noises, the ones which had turned Rod’s first night into a siege of terror. They serenaded every evening for the first hour of darkness. Rod’s mind had long since blanked them out, heeded them no more than chorusing cicadas. He had not consciously heard them for weeks.

Now they failed to wail on time; it upset him.

He grinned sheepishly. “That’s it, Jack. Funny how you get used to a thing. Do you suppose they are on strike?”

“More likely a death in the family,” Jimmy answered. “They’ll be back in voice tomorrow.”

Rod had trouble getting to sleep. When the night watch gave an alarm he was up and out of bachelors’ barracks at once, Colonel Bowie in hand. “What’s up?”

Arthur Nielsen had the watch. “It’s all right now,” he answered nervously. “A big buffalo buck crashed the fence. And this got through.” He indicated the carcass of a dopy joe.

“You’re bleeding.”

“Just a nip.”

Others gathered around. Cowper pushed through, sized the situation and said, “Waxie, get that cut attended to. Bill…where’s Bill? Bill, put somebody else on watch. And let’s get that gap fixed as soon as it’s light.”

It was greying in the east. Margery suggested, “We might as well stay up and have breakfast. I’ll get the fire going.” She left to borrow flame from a watch fire.

Rod peered through the damaged barricade. A big buck was down on the far side and seemed to have at least six dopy joes clinging to it. Cliff was there and said quietly, “See a way to get at them?”

“Only with a gun.”

“We can’t waste ammo on that.”

“No.” Rod thought about it, then went to a pile of bamboo poles, cut for building. He selected a stout one a head shorter than himself, sat down and began to bind Lady Macbeth to it with rawhide, forming a crude pike spear.

Caroline came over and squatted down. “What are you doing?”

“Making a joe-killer.”

She watched him. “I’m going to make me one,” she said suddenly and jumped up.

By daylight the animals were in full flight downstream as if chased by forest fire. As the creek had shrunk with the dry season a miniature beach, from a meter to a couple of meters wide, had been exposed

below the bank on which the town had grown. The thorn kraal had been extended to cover the gap, but the excited animals crushed through this weak point and now streamed along the water past the camp.

After a futile effort no attempt was made to turn them back. They were pouring into the valley; they had to go somewhere, and the route between water and bank made a safety valve. It kept them from shoving the barricade aside by sheer mass. The smallest animals came through it anyhow, kept going, paid no attention to humans.

Rod stayed at the barricade, ate breakfast standing up. He had killed six joes since dawn while Caroline's score was still higher. Others were making knives into spears and joining them. The dopy joes were not coming through in great numbers; most of them continued to chase buck along the lower route past camp. Those who did seep through were speared; meeting them with a knife gave away too much advantage.

Cowper and Kennedy, inspecting defenses, stopped by Rod; they looked worried. "Rod," said Grant "how long is this going to last?"

"How should I know? When we run out of animals. It looks like—get him, Shorty! It looks as if the joes were driving the others, but I don't think they are. I think they've *all* gone crazy."

"But what would cause that?" demanded Kennedy.

"Don't ask me. But I think I know where all those bones on that beach came from. But don't ask why. Why does a chicken cross the road? Why do lemmings do what they do? What makes a plague of locusts? Behind you! *Jump!*"

Kennedy jumped, Rod finished off a joe, and they went on talking. "Better detail somebody to chuck these into the water, Bill, before they stink. Look, Grant, we're okay now, but I know what I would do."

"What? Move to your caves? Rod, you were right—but it's too late."

"No, no! That's spilt milk; forget it. The thing that scares me are these mean little devils. They are no longer dopy; they are fast as can be and nasty…and they can slide through the fence. We can handle them now—but how about when it gets dark? We've got to have a solid line of fire inside the fence and along the bank. Fire is one thing they can't go through… I hope."

"That'll take a lot of wood." Grant looked through the barricade and frowned.

"You bet it will. But it will get us through the night. See here, give me the ax and six men with spears. I'll lead the party."

Kennedy shook his head. "It's my job."

"No, Bill," Cowper said firmly. "I'll lead it. You stay here and take care of the town."

Before the day was over Cowper took two parties out and Bill and Rod led one each. They tried to pick lulls in the spate of animals but Bill's party was caught on the bluff above, where it had been cutting wood and throwing it down past the cave. They were treed for two hours. The little valley had been cleaned out of dead wood months since; it was necessary to go into the forest above to find wood that would burn.

Cliff Pawley, hunter-in-chief, led a fifth party in the late afternoon, immediately broke the handle of the little ax. They returned with what they could gather with knives. While they were away one of the giant buck they called buffalo stampeded off the bluff, fell into camp, broke its neck. Four dopy joes were clinging to it. They were easy to kill as they would not let go.

Jimmy and Rod were on pike duty at the barricade. Jimmy glanced back at where a couple of girls were disposing of the carcasses. "Rod," he said thoughtfully, "we got it wrong. *Those* are stobor…the *real* stobor."

"Huh?"

"The big babies we've been calling that aren't 'stobor.' *These* things are what the Deacon warned us against."

"Well… I don't care what you call them as long as they're dead. On your toes, boy; here they come again."

Cowper ordered fires laid just before dark and was studying how to arrange one stretch so as not to endanger the flume when the matter was settled; the structure quivered and water ceased to flow. Upstream something had crashed into it and broken the flimsy pipe line.

The town had long since abandoned waterskins. Now they were caught with only a few liters in a pot used by the cooks, but it was a hardship rather than a danger; the urgent need was to get a ring of fire around them. There had already been half a dozen casualties—no deaths but bites and slashings, almost all from the little carnivores contemptuously known as dopy joes. The community's pool of antiseptics, depleted by months of use and utterly irreplaceable, had sunk so low that Bob Baxter used it only on major wounds.

When fuel had been stretched ready to burn in a long arc inside the barricade and down the bank to where it curved back under the cave, the results of a hard day's work looked small; the stockpile was not much greater than the amount already spread out. Bill Kennedy looked at it. "It won't last the night, Grant."

"It's *got* to, Bill. Light it."

"If we pulled back from the fence and the bank, then cut over to the bluff—What do you think?"

Cowper tried to figure what might be saved by the change. "It's not much shorter. Uh, don't light the downstream end unless they start

curving back in on us. But let's move; it's getting dark." He hurried to the cooking fire, got a brand and started setting the chain of fire. Kennedy helped and soon the townsite was surrounded on the exposed sides by blaze. Cowper chucked his torch into the fire and said, "Bill, better split the men into two watches and get the women up into the cave—they can crowd in somehow."

"You'll have trouble getting thirty-odd women in there, Grant."

"They can sit up all night. But send them up. Yes, and the wounded men, too."

"Can do." Kennedy started passing the word. Caroline came storming up, spear in hand.

"Grant, what's this nonsense about the girls having to go up to the cave? If you think you're going to cut me out of the fun you had better think again!"

Cowper looked at her wearily. "Carol, I haven't time to monkey. Shut your face and do as you are told."

Caroline opened her mouth, closed it, and did as she was told. Bob Baxter claimed Cowper's attention; Rod noticed that he looked very upset. "Grant? You ordered all the women up to the cave?"

"Yes."

"I'm sorry but Carmen can't."

"You'll have to carry her. She is the one I had most on my mind when I decided on the move."

"But—" Baxter stopped and urged Grant away from the others. He spoke insistently but quietly. Grant shook his head.

"It's not safe, Grant," Baxter went on, raising his voice. "I don't dare risk it. The interval is nineteen minutes now."

"Well…all right. Leave a couple of women with her. Use Caroline, will you? That'll keep her out of my hair."

"Okay." Baxter hurried away.

Kennedy took the first watch with a dozen men spread out along the fire line; Rod was on the second watch commanded by Cliff Pawley. He went to the Baxter house to find out how Carmen was doing, was told to beat it by Agnes. He then went to the bachelors' shed and tried to sleep.

He was awakened by yells, in time to see one of the leonine monsters at least five meters long go bounding through the camp and disappear downstream. It had jumped the barrier, the stakes behind it, and the fire behind that, all in one leap.

Rod called out, "Anybody hurt?"

Shorty Dumont answered. "No. It didn't even stop to wave." Shorty was bleeding from a slash in his left calf; he seemed unaware of it. Rod

crawled back inside tried again to sleep.

He was awakened again by the building shaking. He hurried out. "What's up?"

"That you, Rod? I didn't know anybody was inside. Give me a hand; we're going to burn it." The voice was Baxter's; he was prying at a corner post and cutting rawhide strips that held it.

Rod put his spear where it would not be stepped on, resheathed Colonel Bowie, and started to help. The building was bamboo and leaves, with a mud-and-thatch roof; most of it would burn. "How's Carmen?"

"Okay. Normal progress. I can do more good here. Besides they don't *want* me." Baxter brought the corner of the shed down with a crash, gathered a double armful of wreckage and hurried away. Rod picked up a load and followed him.

The reserve wood pile was gone; somebody was tearing the roof off the "city hall" and banging pieces on the ground to shake clay loose. The walls were sunbaked bricks, but the roof would burn. Rod came closer, saw that it was Cowper who was destroying this symbol of the sovereign community. He worked with the fury of anger. "Let me do that, Grant. Have you had any rest?"

"Huh? No."

"Better get some. It's going to be a long night. What time is it?"

"I don't know. Midnight, maybe." Fire blazed up and Cowper faced it, wiping his face with his hand. "Rod, take charge of the second watch and relieve Bill. Cliff got clawed and I sent him up."

"Okay. Burn everything that will burn—right?"

"Everything but the roof of the Baxter house. But don't use it up too fast; it's got to last till morning."

"Got it." Rod hurried to the fire line, found Kennedy. "Okay, Bill, I'll take over—Grant's orders. Get some sleep. Anything getting through?"

"Not much. And not far." Kennedy's spear was dark with blood in the firelight. "I'm not going to sleep, Rod. Find yourself a spot and help out."

Rod shook his head. "You're groggy. Beat it. Grant's orders."

"No!"

"Well…look, take your gang and tear down the old maids' shack. That'll give you a change, at least."

"Uh—all right." Kennedy left, almost staggering. There was a lull in the onrush of animals; Rod could see none beyond the barricade. It gave him time to sort out his crew, send away those who had been on duty since sunset, send for stragglers. He delegated Doug Sanders and

Mick Mahmud as firetenders, passed the word that no one else was to put fuel on the fires.

He returned from his inspection to find Bob Baxter, spear in hand, holding his place at the center of the line. Rod put a hand on his shoulder. “The medical officer doesn’t need to fight. We aren’t that bad off.”

Baxter shrugged. “I’ve got my kit, what there is left of it. This is where I use it.”

“Haven’t you enough worries?”

Baxter grinned wanly. “Better than walking the floor. Rod, they’re stirring again. Hadn’t we better build up the fires?”

“Mmm…not if we’re going to make it last. I don’t think they can come through that.”

Baxter did not answer, as a joe came through at that instant. It ploughed through the smouldering fire and Baxter speared it. Rod cupped his hands and shouted, “Build up the fires! But go *easy*.”

“Behind you, Rod!”

Rod jumped and whirled, got the little devil. “Where did that one come from? I didn’t see it.”

Before Bob could answer Caroline came running out of darkness. “Bob! Bob Baxter! I’ve got to find Bob Baxter!”

“Over here!” Rod called.

Baxter was hardly able to speak. “Is she—is she?” His face screwed up in anguish.

“No, no!” yelled Caroline. “She’s all right, she’s fine. *It’s a girl!*”

Baxter quietly fainted, his spear falling to the ground. Caroline grabbed him and kept him from falling into the fire. He opened his eyes and said, “Sorry. You scared me. You’re sure Carmen is all right?”

“Right as rain. The baby, too. About three kilos. Here, give me that sticker—Carmen wants you.”

Baxter stumbled away and Caroline took his place. She grinned at Rod. “I feel *swell!* How’s business, Roddie? Brisk? I feel like getting me eight or nine of these vermin.”

Cowper came up a few minutes later. Caroline called out, “Grant, did you hear the good news?”

“Yes. I just came from there.” He ignored Caroline’s presence at the guard line but said to Rod, “We’re making a stretcher out of pieces of the flume and they’re going to haul Carmen up. Then they’ll throw the stretcher down and you can burn it.”

“Good.”

“Agnes is taking the baby up. Rod, what’s the very most we can

crowd into the cave?"

"Gee!" Rod glanced up at the shelf. "They must be spilling off the edge now."

"I'm afraid so. But we've just *got* to pack them in. I want to send up all married men and the youngest boys. The bachelors will hold on here."

"I'm a bachelor!" Caroline interrupted.

Cowper ignored her. "As soon as Carmen is safe we do it—we can't keep fires going much longer." He turned away, headed up to the cave.

Caroline whistled softly. "Roddie, we're going to have fun."

"Not my idea of fun. Hold the fort, Carol. I've got to line things up." He moved down the line, telling each one to go or to stay.

Jimmy scowled at him. "I won't go, not as long as anybody stays. I couldn't look Jackie in the face."

"You'll button your lip and do as Grant says—or I'll give you a mouthful of teeth. Hear me?"

"I hear you. I don't like it."

"You don't have to like it, just do it. Seen Jackie? How is she?"

"I snuck up a while ago. She's all right, just queasy. But the news about Carmen makes her feel so good she doesn't care."

Rod used no age limit to determine who was expendable. With the elimination of married men, wounded, and all women he had little choice; he simply told those whom he considered too young or not too skilled that they were to leave when word was passed. It left him with half a dozen, plus himself, Cowper, and—possibly—Caroline. Trying to persuade Caroline was a task he had postponed.

He returned and found Cowper. "Carmen's gone up," Cowper told him. "You can send the others up now."

"Then we can burn the roof of the Baxter house."

"I tore it down while they were hoisting her." Cowper looked around. "Carol! Get on up."

She set her feet. "I won't!"

Rod said softly, "Carol, you heard him. Go up—*right now!*"

She scowled, stuck out her lip, then said, "All right for *you*, Roddie Walker!"—turned and fled up the path.

Rod cupped his hands and shouted, "All right, everybody! All hands up but those I told to stay. Hurry!"

About half of those leaving had started up when Agnes called down, "Hey! Take it slow! Somebody will get pushed over the edge if you don't quit shoving."

The queue stopped. Jimmy called out, "Everybody exhale. That'll

do it."

Somebody called back, "Throw Jimmy off…*that* will do it." The line moved again, slowly. In ten minutes they accomplished the sardine-packing problem of fitting nearly seventy people into a space comfortable for not more than a dozen. It could not even be standing room since a man could stand erect only on the outer shelf. The girls were shoved inside, sitting or squatting, jammed so that they hardly had air to breathe. The men farthest out could stand but were in danger of stepping off the edge in the dark, or of being elbowed off.

Grant said, "Watch things, Rod, while I have a look." He disappeared up the path, came back in a few minutes. "Crowded as the bottom of a sack," he said. "Here's the plan. They can scrunch back farther if they have to. It will be uncomfortable for the wounded and Carmen may have to sit up—she's lying down—but it can be done. When the fires die out, we'll shoehorn the rest in. With spears poking out under the overhang at the top of the path we ought to be able to hold out until daylight. Check me?"

"Sounds as good as can be managed."

"All right. When the time comes, you go up next to last, I go up last."

"Unh… I'll match you."

Cowper answered with surprising vulgarity and added, "I'm boss; I go last. We'll make the rounds and pile anything left on the fires, then gather them all here. You take the bank, I take the fence."

It did not take long to put the remnants on the fires, then they gathered around the path and waited—Roy, Kenny, Doug, Dick, Charlie, Howard, and Rod and Grant. Another wave of senseless migration was rolling but the fires held it, bypassed it around by the water.

Rod grew stiff and shifted his spear to his left hand. The dying fires were only glowing coals in spots. He looked for signs of daylight in the east. Howard Goldstein said, "One broke through at the far end."

"Hold it, Goldie," Cowper said. "We won't bother it unless it comes here." Rod shifted his spear back to his right hand.

The wall of fire was now broken in many places. Not only could joes get through, but worse, it was hard to see them, so little light did the embers give off. Cowper turned to Rod and said, "All right, everybody up. You tally them." Then he shouted, "Bill! Agnes! Make room, I'm sending them up."

Rod threw a glance at the fence, then turned. "Okay, Kenny first. Doug next, don't crowd. Goldie and then Dick. Who's left? Roy—" He turned, uneasily aware that something had changed.

Grant was no longer behind him. Rod spotted him bending over a dying fire. "Hey, Grant!"

“Be right with you.” Cowper selected a stick from the embers, waved it into flame. He hopped over the coals, picked his way through sharpened stakes, reached the thornbush barrier, shoved his torch into it. The dry branches flared up. He moved slowly away, picking his way through the stake trap.

“I’ll help you!” Rod shouted. “I’ll fire the other end.”

Cowper turned and light from the burning thorn showed his stern, bearded face. “Stay back. Get the others up. That’s an order!”

The movement upward had stopped. Rod snarled, “Get on up, you lunkheads! Move!” He jabbed with the butt of his spear, then turned around.

Cowper had set the fire in a new place. He straightened up, about to move farther down, suddenly turned and jumped over the dying line of fire. He stopped and jabbed at something in the darkness…then screamed.

“Grant!” Rod jumped down, ran toward him. But Grant was down before he reached him, down with a joe worrying each leg and more coming. Rod thrust at one, jerked his spear out, and jabbed at the other, trying not to stab Grant. He felt one grab his leg and wondered that it did not hurt.

Then it did hurt, terribly, and he realized that he was down and his spear was not in his hand. But his hand found his knife without asking; Colonel Bowie finished off the beast clamped to his ankle.

Everything seemed geared to nightmare slowness. Other figures were thrusting leisurely at shapes that hardly crawled. The thornbush, flaming high, gave him light to see and stab a dopy joe creeping toward him. He got it, rolled over and tried to get up.

He woke with daylight in his eyes, tried to move and discovered that his left leg hurt. He looked down and saw a compress of leaves wrapped with a neat hide bandage. He was in the cave and there were others lying parallel to him. He got to one elbow. “Say, what—”

“Sssh!” Sue Kennedy crawled over and knelt by him. “The baby is asleep.”

“Oh…”

“I’m on nurse duty. Want anything?”

“I guess not. Uh, what did they name her?”

“Hope. Hope Roberta Baxter. A pretty name. I’ll tell Caroline you are awake.” She turned away.

Caroline came in, squatted and looked scornfully at his ankle. “That’ll teach you to have a party and not invite *me*.”

“I guess so. Carol, what’s the situation?”

“Six on the sick list. About twice that many walking wounded.

Those not hurt are gathering wood and cutting thorn. We fixed the ax."

"Yes, but…we're not having to fight them off?"

"Didn't Sue tell you? A few buck walking around as if they were dazed. That's all."

"They may start again."

"If they do, we'll be ready."

"Good." He tried to raise up. "Where's Grant? How bad was he hurt?"

She shook her head. "Grant didn't make it, Roddie."

"Huh?"

"Bob took off both legs at the knee and would have taken off one arm, but he died while he was operating." She made a very final gesture. "In the creek."

Rod started to speak, turned his head and buried his face. Caroline put a hand on him. "Don't take it hard, Roddie. Bob shouldn't have tried to save him. Grant is better off."

Rod decided that Carol was right—no frozen limb banks on *this* planet. But it did not make him feel better. "We didn't appreciate him," he muttered.

"Stow it!" Caroline whispered fiercely. "He was a fool."

"Huh? Carol, I'm ashamed of you."

He was surprised to see tears rolling down her cheeks. "You *know* he was a fool, Roddie Walker. Most of us knew…but we loved him anyhow. I would'uv *married* him, but he never asked me." She wiped at tears. "Have you seen the baby?"

"No."

Her face lit up. "I'll fetch her. She's beautiful."

"Sue said she was asleep."

"Well…all right. But what I came up for is this: what do you want us to do?"

"Huh?" He tried to think. Grant was dead. "Bill was his deputy. Is Bill laid up?"

"Didn't Sue tell you?"

"Tell me what?"

"You're the mayor. We elected you this morning. Bill and Roy and I are just trying to hold things together."

Rod felt dizzy. Caroline's face kept drawing back, then swooping in; he wondered if he were going to faint.

"—plenty of wood," she was saying, "and we'll have the kraal built by sundown. We don't need meat; Margery is butchering that big fellow

that fell off the bluff and busted his neck. We can't trek out until you and Carmen and the others can walk, so we're trying to get the place back into shape temporarily. Is there anything you want us to do now?"

He considered it. "No. Not now."

"Okay. You're supposed to rest." She backed out, stood up. "I'll look in later." Rod eased his leg and turned over. After a while he quieted and went to sleep.

Sue brought broth in a bowl, held his head while he drank, then fetched Hope Baxter and held her for him to see. Rod said the usual inanities, wondering if all new babies looked that way.

Then he thought for a long time.

Caroline showed up with Roy. "How's it going, Chief?" Roy said.

"Ready to bite a rattlesnake."

"That's a nasty foot, but it ought to heal. We boiled the leaves and Bob used sulfa."

"Feels all right. I don't seem feverish."

"Jimmy always said you were too mean to die," added Caroline. "Want anything, Roddie? Or to tell us anything?"

"Yes."

"What?"

"Get me out of here. Help me down the path."

Roy said hastily, "Hey, you can't do that. You're not in shape."

"Can't I? Either help, or get out of my way. And get everybody together. We're going to have a town meeting."

They looked at each other and walked out on him. He had made it to the squeeze at the top when Baxter showed up. "Now, Rod! Get back and lie down."

"Out of my way."

"Listen, boy, I don't like to get rough with a sick man. But I will if you make me."

"Bob…how bad is my ankle?"

"It's going to be all right…*if* you behave. If you don't—well, have you ever seen gangrene? When it turns black and has that sweetish odor?"

"Quit trying to scare me. Is there any reason not to put a line under my arms and lower me?"

"Well…"

They used two lines and a third to keep his injured leg free, with Baxter supervising. They caught him at the bottom and carried him to the cooking space, laid him down. "Thanks," he grunted. "Everybody

here who can get here?"

"I think so, Roddie. Shall I count?"

"Never mind. I understand you folks elected me cap—I mean 'mayor'—this morning?"

"That's right," agreed Kennedy.

"Uh, who else was up? How many votes did I get?"

"Huh? It was unanimous."

Rod sighed. "Thanks. I'm not sure I would have held still for it if I'd been here. I gathered something else. Do I understand that you expect me to take you down to the caves Roy and I found? Caroline said something…"

Roy looked surprised. "We didn't vote it, Rod, but that was the idea. After last night everybody knows we can't stay here."

Rod nodded. "I see. Are you all where I can see you? I've got something to say. I hear you adopted a constitution and things while Roy and I were away. I've never read them, so I don't know whether this is legal or not. But if I'm stuck with the job, I expect to run things. If somebody doesn't like what I do and we're both stubborn enough for a showdown, then you will vote. You back me up, or you turn me down and elect somebody else. Will that work? How about it, Goldie? You were on the law committee, weren't you?"

Howard Goldstein frowned. "You don't express it very well, Rod."

"Probably not. Well?"

"But what you have described is the parliamentary vote-of-confidence. That's the backbone of our constitution. We did it that way to keep it simple and still democratic. It was Grant's notion."

"I'm glad," Rod said soberly. "I'd hate to think that I had torn up Grant's laws after he worked so hard on them. I'll study them, I promise, first chance I get. But about moving to the caves—we'll have a vote of confidence right now."

Goldstein smiled. "I can tell you how it will come out. We're convinced."

Rod slapped the ground. "You don't understand! If you want to move, move…but get somebody else to lead you. Roy can do it. Or Cliff, or Bill. But if you leave it to me, no dirty little beasts, all teeth and no brains, are going to drive us out. We're *men*…and men don't *have* to be driven out, not by the likes of those. Grant paid for this land—and I say stay here and keep it for him!"

14

Civilization

THE HONORABLE RODERICK L. WALKER, Mayor of Cowpertown, Chief of State of the sovereign planet GO-73901-II (Lima Catalog), Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces, Chief Justice, and Defender of Freedoms, was taking his ease in front of the Mayor's Palace. He was also scratching and wondering if he should ask somebody to cut his hair again—he suspected lice…only this planet did not have lice.

His Chief of Government, Miss Caroline Beatrice Mshiyeni, squatted in front of him. "Roddie, I've told them and told them and told them…and it does no good. That family makes more filth than everybody else put together. You should have seen it this morning. Garbage in front of their door…flies!"

"I saw it."

"Well, what do I do? If you would let me rough him up a little. But you're too soft."

"I guess I am." Rod looked thoughtfully at a slab of slate erected in the village square. It read:

To the Memory of
ULYSSES GRANT COWPER,
First Mayor
—who died for his city

The carving was not good; Rod had done it.

"Grant told me once," he added, "that government was the art of getting along with people you don't like."

"Well, I sure don't like Bruce and Theo!"

"Neither do I. But Grant would have figured out a way to keep them in line without getting rough."

"You figure it out, I can't. Roddie, you should never have let Bruce come back. That was bad enough. But when he married that little… well!"

"They were made for each other," Rod answered. "Nobody else would have married either of them."

"It's no joke. It's almost—*Hope!* Quit teasing Grantie!" She bounced up.

Miss Hope Roberta Baxter, sixteen months, and Master Grant Roderick Throxton, thirteen months, stopped what they were doing,

which was, respectively, slapping and crying. Both were naked and very dirty. It was "clean" dirt; each child had been bathed by Caroline an hour earlier, and both were fat and healthy.

Hope turned up a beaming face. "*'Ood* babee!" she asserted.

"I *saw* you." Caroline upended her, gave her a spat that would not squash a fly, then picked up Grant Throxton.

"Give her to me," Rod said.

"You're welcome to her," Caroline said. She sat down with the boy in her lap and rocked him. "Poor baby! Show Auntie Carol where it hurts."

"You shouldn't talk like that. You'll make a sissy of him."

"Look who's talking! Wishy-Washy Walker."

Hope threw her arms around Rod, part way, and cooed, "Woddie!" adding a muddy kiss. He returned it. He considered her deplorably spoiled; nevertheless he contributed more than his share of spoiling.

"Sure," agreed Carol. "Everybody loves Uncle Roddie. He hands out the medals and Aunt Carol does the dirty work."

"Carol, I've been thinking."

"Warm day. Don't strain any delicate parts."

"About Bruce and Theo. I'll talk to them."

"Talk!"

"The only real punishment is one we never use—and I hope we never have to. Kicking people out, I mean. The McGowans do as they please because they don't think we would. But I would love to give them the old heave-ho…and if it comes to it, I'll make an issue of it before the town—either kick them out or I quit."

"They'd back you. Why, I bet he hasn't taken a bath this week!"

"I don't care whether they back me or not. I've ridden out seven confidence votes; someday I'll be lucky and retire. But the problem is to convince Bruce that I am willing to face the issue, for then I won't have to. Nobody is going to chance being turned out in the woods, not when they've got it soft here. But he's got to be convinced."

"Uh, maybe if he thought you were carrying a grudge about that slice in the ribs he gave you?"

"And maybe I am. But I can't let it be personal, Carol; I'm too stinkin' proud."

"Uh… Turn it around. Convince him that the town is chompin' at the bit—which isn't far wrong—and you are trying to restrain them."

"Um, that's closer. Yes, I think Grant would have gone for that. I'll think it over."

"Do that." She stood up. "I'm going to give these children another

bath. I declare I don't know where they find so much dirt."

She swung away with a child on each hip, heading for the shower sheds. Rod watched her lazily. She was wearing a leather bandeau and a Maori grass skirt, long leaves scraped in a pattern, curled, and dried. It was a style much favored and Caroline wore it around town, although when she treated herself to a day's hunting she wore a leather breechclout such as the men wore.

The same leaf fibre could be retted and crushed, combed and spun, but the cloth as yet possessed by the colony was not even enough for baby clothes. Bill Kennedy had whittled a loom for Sue and it worked, but neither well nor fast and the width of cloth was under a half meter. Still, Rod mused, it was progress, it was civilization. They had come a long way.

The town was stobor-tight now. An adobe wall too high and sheer for any but the giant lions covered the upstream side and the bank, and any lion silly enough to jump it landed on a bed of stakes too wide now for even their mighty leaps—the awning under which Rod lolled was the hide of one that had made that mistake. The wall was pierced by stobor traps, narrow tunnels just big enough for the vicious little beasts and which gave into deep pits, where they could chew on each other like Kilkenny cats—which they did.

It might have been easier to divert them around the town, but Rod wanted to kill them; he would not be content until their planet was rid of those vermin.

In the meantime the town was safe. Stobor continued to deserve the nickname "dopy joe" except during the dry season and then they did not become dangerous until the annual berserk migration—the last of which had passed without loss of blood; the colony's defenses worked, now that they understood what to defend against. Rod had required mothers and children to sit out the stampede in the cave; the rest sat up two nights and stayed on guard…but no blade was wet.

Rod thought sleepily that the next thing they needed was paper; Grant had been right…even a village was hard to run without writing paper. Besides, they must avoid losing the habit of writing. He wanted to follow up Grant's notion of recording every bit of knowledge the gang possessed. Take logarithms—logarithms might not be used for generations, but when it came time to log a couple of rhythms, then… he went to sleep.

"You busy, Chief?"

Rod looked up at Arthur Nielsen. "Just sleeping…a practice I heartily recommend on a warm Sabbath afternoon. What's up, Art? Are Shorty and Doug pushing the bellows alone?"

"No. Confounded plug came out and we lost our fire. The furnace is ruined." Nielsen sat down wearily. He was hot, very red in the face, and looked discouraged. He had a bad burn on a forearm but did not seem

to know it. “Rod, what are we doing wrong? Riddle me that.”

“Talk to one of the brains. If you didn’t know more about it than I do, we’d swap jobs.”

“I wasn’t really asking. I know two things that are wrong. We can’t build a big enough installation and we don’t have coal. Rod, we’ve *got* to have coal; for cast iron or steel we need coal. Charcoal won’t do for anything but spongy wrought iron.”

“What do you expect to accomplish overnight, Art? Miracles? You are years ahead of what anybody could ask. You’ve turned out metal, whether it’s wrought iron or uranium. Since you made that spit for the barbecue pit, Margery thinks you are a genius.”

“Yes, yes, we’ve made iron—but it ought to be lots better and more of it. This ore is wonderful…the real Lake Superior hematite. Nobody’s seen such ore in commercial quantity on Terra in centuries. You ought to be able to breathe on it and make steel. And I could, too, if I had coal. We’ve got clay, we’ve got limestone, we’ve got this lovely ore—but I *can’t* get a hot enough fire.”

Rod was not fretted; the colony was getting metal as fast as needed. But Waxie was upset. “Want to knock off and search for coal?”

“Uh…no, I don’t. I want to rebuild that furnace.” Nielsen gave a bitter description of the furnace’s origin, habits, and destination.

“Who knows most about geology?”

“Uh, I suppose I do.”

“Who knows next most?”

“Why, Doug I guess.”

“Let’s send him out with a couple of boys to find coal. You can have Mick in his place on the bellows—no, wait a minute. How about Bruce?”

“Bruce? *He* won’t work.”

“Work him. If you work him so hard he runs away and forgets to come back, we won’t miss him. Take him, Art, as a favor to me.”

“Well…okay, if you say so.”

“Good. You get one bonus out of losing your batch. You won’t miss the dance tonight. Art, you shouldn’t start a melt so late in the week; you need your day of rest…and so do Shorty and Doug.”

“I know. But when it’s ready to go I want to fire it off. Working the way we do is discouraging; before you can make anything you have to make the thing that makes it—and usually you have to make something else to make that. Futile!”

“You don’t know what ‘futile’ means. Ask our ‘Department of Agriculture.’ Did you take a look at the farm before you came over the wall?”

"Well, we walked through it."

"Better not let Cliff catch you, or he'll scalp you. I might hold you for him."

"Humph! A lot of silly grass! Thousands of hectares around just like it."

"That's right. Some grass and a few rows of weeds. The pity is that Cliff will never live to see it anything else. Nor little Cliff. Nevertheless our great grandchildren will eat white bread, Art. But you yourself will live to build precision machinery—you know it can be done, which, as Bob Baxter says, is two-thirds of the battle. Cliff *can't* live long enough to eat a slice of light, tasty bread. It doesn't stop him."

"You should have been a preacher, Rod." Art stood up and sniffed himself. "I'd better get a bath, or the girls won't dance with me."

"I was just quoting. You've heard it before. Save me some soap."

Caroline hit two bars of *Arkansas Traveler*, Jimmy slapped his drum, and Roy called, "Square 'em up, folks!" He waited, then started in high, nasal tones:

"Honor y'r *part*ners!

"Honor y'r *cor*ners!

"Now *all* jump *up* and *when* y' come *down*—"

Rod was not dancing; the alternate set would be his turn. The colony formed eight squares, too many for a caller, a mouth organ, and a primitive drum all unassisted by amplifying equipment. So half of them babysat and gossiped while the other half danced. The caller and the orchestra were relieved at each intermission to dance the other sets.

Most of them had not known how to square-dance. Agnes Pulvermacher had put it over almost single-handed, in the face of kidding and resistance—training callers, training dancers, humming tunes to Caroline, cajoling Jimmy to carve and shrink a jungle drum. Now she had nine out of ten dancing.

Rod had not appreciated it at first (he was not familiar with the history of the Mormon pioneers) and had regarded it as a nuisance which interfered with work. Then he saw the colony, which had experienced a bad letdown after the loss in one night of all they had built, an apathy he had not been able to lift—he saw this same colony begin to smile and joke and work hard simply from being exposed to music and dancing.

He decided to encourage it. He had trouble keeping time and could not carry a tune, but the bug caught him, too; he danced not well but with great enthusiasm.

The village eventually limited dances to Sabbath nights, weddings, and holidays—and made them "formal"…which meant that women

wore grass skirts. Leather shorts, breechclouts, and slacks (those not long since cut up for rags) were not acceptable. Sue talked about making a real square dance dress as soon as she got far enough ahead in her weaving, and a cowboy shirt for her husband…but the needs of the colony made this a distant dream.

Music stopped, principals changed, Caroline tossed her mouth organ to Shorty, and came over. “Come on, Roddie, let’s kick some dust.”

“I asked Sue,” he said hastily and truthfully. He was careful not to ask the same girl twice, never to pay marked attention to any female; he had promised himself long ago that the day he decided to marry should be the day he resigned and he was not finding it hard to stay married to his job. He liked to dance with Caroline; she was a popular partner—except for a tendency to swing her partner instead of letting him swing her—but he was careful not to spend much social time with her because she was his right hand, his alter ego.

Rod went over and offered his arm to Sue. He did not think about it; the stylized amenities of civilization were returning and the formal politenesses of the dance made them seem natural. He led her out and assisted in making a botch of *Texas Star*.

Later, tired, happy, and convinced that the others in his square had made the mistakes and he had straightened them out, Rod returned Sue to Bill, bowed and thanked him, and went back to the place that was always left for him. Margery and her assistants were passing out little brown somethings on wooden skewers. He accepted one. “Smells good, Marge. What are they?”

“Mock Nile birds. Smoked baby-buck bacon wrapped around hamburger. Salt and native sage, pan broiled. You’d better like it; it took us *hours*.”

“Mmmm! I do! How about another?”

“Wait and see. Greedy.”

“But I need more. I work hardest. I have to keep up my strength.”

“That was *work* I saw you doing this afternoon?” She handed him another.

“I was planning. The old brain was buzzing away.”

“I heard the buzzing. Pretty loud, when you lie on your back.”

He snagged a third as she turned away, looked up to catch Jacqueline smiling; he winked and grinned.

“Happy, Rod?”

“Yes indeedy. How about you, Jackie?”

“I’ve never been happier,” she said seriously.

Her husband put an arm around her. “See what the love of a good

man can do, Rod?" Jimmy said. "When I found this poor child she was beaten, bedraggled, doing your cooking and afraid to admit her name. Now look at her!—fat and sassy."

"I'm not *that* fat!"

"Pleasingly plump."

Rod glanced up at the cave. "Jackie, remember the night I showed up?"

"I'm not likely to forget."

"And the silly notion I had that this was Africa? Tell me—if you had it to do over, would you rather I had been right?"

"I never thought about it. I knew it was not."

"Yes, but 'if'? You would have been home long ago."

Her hand took her husband's. "I would not have met James."

"Oh, yes, you would. You had already met me. You could not have avoided it—my best friend."

"Possibly. But I would not change it. I have no yearning to go 'home,' Rod. *This* is home."

"Me neither," asserted Jimmy. "You know what? This colony gets a little bigger—and it's getting bigger fast—Goldie and I are going to open a law office. We won't have any competition and can pick our clients. He'll handle the criminal end, I'll specialize in divorce, and we'll collaborate on corporate skulduggery. We'll make *millions*. I'll drive a big limousine drawn by eight spanking buck, smoking a big cigar and sneering at the peasants." He called out, "Right, Goldie?"

"Precisely, colleague. I'm making us a shingle: 'Goldstein & Throxton—Get bailed, not jailed!'"

"Keerect. But make that: 'Throxton & Goldstein.'"

"I'm senior. I've got two more years of law."

"A quibble. Rod, are you going to let this Teller U. character insult an old Patrick Henry man?"

"Probably. Jimmy, I don't see how you are going to work this. I don't think we have a divorce law. Let's ask Caroline."

"A trifle. You perform the marriages, Rod; I'll take care of the divorces."

"Ask Caroline what?" asked Caroline.

"Do we have a divorce law?"

"Huh? We don't even have a getting-married law."

"Unnecessary," explained Goldstein. "Indigenous in the culture. Besides, we ran out of paper."

"Correct, Counselor," agreed Jimmy.

“Why ask?” Caroline demanded. “Nobody is thinking about divorce or I would know before they would.”

“We weren’t talking about that,” Rod explained. “Jackie said that she had no wish to go back to Terra and Jimmy was elaborating. Uselessly, as usual.”

Caroline stared. “Why would anybody want to go back?”

“Sure,” agreed Jimmy. “This is the place. No income tax. No traffic, no crowds, no commercials, no telephones. Seriously, Rod, every one here was aiming for the Outlands or we wouldn’t have been taking a survival test. So what difference does it make? Except that we’ve got everything sooner.” He squeezed his wife’s hand. “I was fooling about that big cigar; I’m rich now, boy, rich!”

Agnes and Curt had drawn into the circle, listening. Agnes nodded and said, “For once you aren’t joking, Jimmy. The first months we were here I cried myself to sleep every night, wondering if they would ever find us. Now I know they never will—and I don’t care! I wouldn’t go back if I could; the only thing I miss is lipstick.”

Her husband’s laugh boomed out. “There you have the truth, Rod. The fleshpots of Egypt…put a cosmetics counter across this creek and every woman here will walk on water.”

“That’s not fair, Curt! Anyhow, you promised to make lipstick.”

“Give me time.”

Bob Baxter came up and sat down by Rod. “Missed you at the meeting this morning, Rod.”

“Tied up. I’ll make it next week.”

“Good.” Bob, being of a sect which did not require ordination, had made himself chaplain as well as medical officer simply by starting to hold meetings. His un-dogmatic ways were such that Christian, Jew, Monist, or Moslem felt at ease; his meetings were well attended.

“Bob, would *you* go back?”

“Go where, Caroline?”

“Back to Terra.”

“Yes.”

Jimmy looked horrified. “Boil me for breakfast! *Why?*”

“Oh, I’d want to come back! But I need to graduate from medical school.” He smiled shyly. “I may be the best surgeon in the neighborhood, but that isn’t saying much.”

“Well…” admitted Jimmy, “I see your point. But you already suit us. Eh, Jackie?”

“Yes, Jimmy.”

“It’s my only regret,” Bob went on. “I’ve lost ones I should have

saved. But it's a hypothetical question. 'Here we rest.'"

The question spread. Jimmy's attitude was overwhelmingly popular, even though Bob's motives were respected. Rod said goodnight; he heard them still batting it around after he had gone to bed; it caused him to discuss it with himself.

He had decided long ago that they would never be in touch with Earth; he had not thought of it for—how long?—over a year. At first it had been mental hygiene, protection of his morale. Later it was logic: a delay in recall of a week might be a power failure, a few weeks could be a technical difficulty—but months on months was cosmic disaster; each day added a cipher to the infinitesimal probability that they would ever be in touch again.

He was now able to ask himself: was this what he wanted?

Jackie was right; this was home. Then he admitted that he *liked* being big frog in a small puddle, he loved his job. He was not meant to be a scientist, nor a scholar, he had never wanted to be a businessman—but what he was doing suited him…and he seemed to do it well enough to get by.

"'Here we rest!'"

He went to sleep in a warm glow.

Cliff wanted help with the experimental crops. Rod did not take it too seriously; Cliff always wanted something; given his head he would have everybody working dawn to dark on his farm. But it was well to find out what he wanted—Rod did not underrate the importance of domesticating plants; that was basic for all colonies and triply so for them. It was simply that he did not know much about it.

Cliff stuck his head into the mayor's hut. "Ready?"

"Sure." Rod got his spear. It was no longer improvised but bore a point patiently sharpened from steel salvaged from Braun's Thunderbolt. Rod had tried wrought iron but could not get it to hold an edge. "Let's pick up a couple of boys and get a few stobor."

"Okay."

Rod looked around. Jimmy was at his potter's wheel, kicking the treadle and shaping clay with his thumb. "Jim! Quit that and grab your pike. We're going to have some fun."

Throxton wiped at sweat. "You've talked me into it."

They added Kenny and Mick, then Cliff led them upstream. "I want you to look at the animals."

"All right," agreed Rod. "Cliff, I had been meaning to speak to you. If you are going to raise those brutes inside the wall, you'll have to be careful about their droppings. Carol has been muttering."

"Rod, I can't do everything! And you can't put them outside, not if

you expect them to live."

"Sure, sure! Well, we'll get you more help, that's the only—Just a second!"

They were about to pass the last hut; Bruce McGowan was stretched in front of it, apparently asleep. Rod did not speak at once; he was fighting down rage. He wrestled with himself, aware that the next moment could change his future, damage the entire colony. But his rational self was struggling in a torrent of anger, bitter and self-righteous. He wanted to do away with this parasite, destroy it. He took a deep breath and tried to keep his mouth from trembling.

"Bruce!" he called softly.

McGowan opened his eyes. "Huh?"

"Isn't Art working his plant today?"

"Could be," Bruce admitted.

"Well?"

"'Well' what? I've had a week and it's not my dish. Get somebody else."

Bruce wore his knife, as did each of them; a colonist was more likely to be caught naked than without his knife. It was the all-purpose tool, for cutting leather, preparing food, eating, whittling, building, basketmaking, and as make-do for a thousand other tools; their wealth came from knives, arrows were now used to hunt—but knives shaped the bows and arrows.

But a knife had not been used by one colonist against another since that disastrous day when Bruce's brother had defied Rod. Over the same issue, Rod recalled; the wheel had turned full circle. But today he would have immediate backing if Bruce reached for his knife.

But he knew that this must not be settled by five against one; he alone must make this dog come to heel, or his days as leader were numbered.

It did not occur to Rod to challenge Bruce to settle it with bare hands. Rod had read many a historical romance in which the hero invited someone to settle it "man to man," in a stylized imitation fighting called "boxing." Rod had enjoyed such stories but did not apply them to himself any more than he considered personally the sword play of *The Three Musketeers*; nevertheless, he knew what "boxing" meant—they folded their hands and struck certain restricted blows with fists. Usually no one was hurt.

The fighting that Rod was trained in was not simply strenuous athletics. It did not matter whether they were armed; if he and Bruce fought bare hands or otherwise, someone would be killed or badly hurt. The *only* dangerous weapon was man himself.

Bruce stared sullenly. "Bruce," Rod said, striving to keep his voice

steady, “a long time ago I told you that people worked around here or got out. You and your brother didn’t believe me so we had to chuck you out. Then you crawled back with a tale about how Jock had been killed and could you please join up? You were a sorry sight. Remember?”

McGowan scowled. “You promised to be a little angel,” Rod went on. “People thought I was foolish—and I was. But I thought you might behave.”

Bruce pulled a blade of grass, bit it. “Bub, you remind me of Jock. He was always throwing his weight around, too.”

“Bruce, get up and get out of town! I don’t care where, but if you are smart, you will shag over and tell Art you’ve made a mistake—then start pumping that bellows. I’ll stop by later. If sweat isn’t pouring off you when I arrive…then you’ll never come back. You’ll be banished for life.”

McGowan looked uncertain. He glanced past Rod, and Rod wondered what expressions the others wore. But Rod kept his eyes on Bruce. “Get moving. Get to work, or don’t come back.”

Bruce got a sly look. “You can’t order me kicked out. It takes a majority vote.”

Jimmy spoke up. “Aw, quit taking his guff, Rod. Kick him out now.”

Rod shook his head. “No. Bruce, if that is your answer, I’ll call them together and we’ll put you in exile before lunch—and I’ll bet my best knife that you won’t get three votes to let you stay. Want to bet?”

Bruce sat up and looked at the others, sizing his chances. He looked back at Rod. “Runt,” he said slowly, “you aren’t worth a hoot without stooges…or a couple of girls to do your fighting.”

Jimmy whispered, “Watch it, Rod!” Rod licked dry lips, knowing that it was too late for reason, too late for talk. He would have to try to take him…he was not sure he could.

“I’ll fight you,” he said hoarsely. “Right now!”

Cliff said urgently, “Don’t, Rod. We’ll manage him.”

“No. Come on, McGowan.” Rod added one unforgivable word.

McGowan did not move. “Get rid of that joe sticker.”

Rod said, “Hold my spear, Cliff.”

Cliff snapped, “Now wait! I’m not going to stand by and watch this. He might get lucky and kill you, Rod.”

“Get out of the way, Cliff.”

“No.” Cliff hesitated, then added, “Bruce, throw your knife away. Go ahead—or so help me I’ll poke a joe-sticker in your belly myself. Give me your knife, Rod.”

Rod looked at Bruce, then drew Colonel Bowie and handed it to

Cliff. Bruce straightened up and flipped his knife at Cliff's feet. Cliff rasped, "I still say not to, Rod. Say the word and we'll take him apart."

"Back off. Give us room."

"Well—no bone breakers. You hear me, Bruce? Make a mistake and you'll never make another."

"'No bone breakers,'" Rod repeated, and knew dismally that the rule would work against him; Bruce had him on height and reach and weight.

"Okay," McGowan agreed. "Just cat clawing. I am going to show this rube that one McGowan is worth two of him."

Cliff sighed. "Back off, everybody. Okay—get going!"

Crouched, they sashayed around, not touching. Only the preliminaries could use up much time; the textbook used in most high schools and colleges listed twenty-seven ways to destroy or disable a man hand to hand; none of the methods took as long as three seconds once contact was made. They chopped at each other, feinting with their hands, too wary to close.

Rod was confused by the injunction not to let the fight go to conclusion. Bruce grinned at him. "What's the matter? Scared? I've been waiting for this, you loudmouthed pimple—now you're going to get it!" He rushed him.

Rod gave back, ready to turn Bruce's rush into his undoing. But Bruce did not carry it through; it had been a feint and Rod had reacted too strongly. Bruce laughed. "Scared silly, huh? You had better be."

Rod realized that he *was* scared, more scared than he had ever been. The conviction flooded over him that Bruce intended to kill him…the agreement about bonebreakers meant nothing; this ape meant to finish him.

He backed away, more confused than ever…knowing that he must forget rules if he was to live through it…but knowing, too, that he *had* to abide by the silly restriction even if it meant the end of him. Panic shook him; he wanted to run.

He did not quite do so. From despair itself he got a cold feeling of nothing to lose and decided to finish it. He exposed his groin to a *savate* attack.

He saw Bruce's foot come up in the expected kick; with fierce joy he reached in the proper *shinobi* counter. He showed the merest of hesitation, knowing that a full twist would break Bruce's ankle.

Then he was flying through air; his hands had never touched Bruce. He had time for sick realization that Bruce had seen the gambit, countered with another—when he struck ground and Bruce was on him.

"Can you move your arm, Rod?"

He tried to focus his eyes, and saw Bob Baxter's face floating over him. "I licked him?"

Baxter did not answer. An angry voice answered, "Cripes, no! He almost chewed you to pieces."

Rod stirred and said thickly, "Where is he? I've got to whip him."

Baxter said sharply, "Lie still!" Cliff added, "Don't worry, Rod. We fixed him." Baxter insisted, "Shut up. See if you can move your left arm."

Rod moved the arm, felt pain shoot through it, jerked and felt pain everywhere. "It's not broken," Baxter decided. "Maybe a green-stick break. We'll put it in sling. Can you sit up? I'll help."

"I want to stand." He made it with help, stood swaying. Most of the villagers seemed to be there; they moved jerkily. It made him dizzy and he blinked.

"Take it easy, boy," he heard Jimmy say. "Bruce pretty near ruined you. You were crazy to give him the chance."

"I'm all right," Rod answered and winced. "Where is he?"

"Behind you. Don't worry, we fixed him."

"Yes," agreed Cliff. "We worked him over. Who does he think he is? Trying to shove the Mayor around!" He spat angrily.

Bruce was face down, features hidden in one arm; he was sobbing. "How bad is he hurt?" Rod asked.

"Him?" Jimmy said scornfully. "He's not hurt. I mean, he hurts all right—but he's not hurt. Carol wouldn't let us."

Caroline squatted beside Bruce, guarding him. She got up. "I should have let 'em," she said angrily. "But I knew you would be mad at me if I did." She put hands on hips. "Roddie Walker, when are you going to get sense enough to yell for me when you're in trouble? These four dopes stood around and let it happen."

"Wait a minute, Carol," Cliff protested. "I tried to stop it. We all tried, but—"

"But I wouldn't listen," Rod interrupted. "Never mind, Carol, I flubbed it."

"If you would listen to me—"

"Never mind!" Rod went to McGowan, prodded him. "Turn over."

Bruce slowly rolled over. Rod wondered if he himself looked as bad. Bruce's body was dirt and blood and bruises; his face looked as if someone had tried to file the features off. "Stand up."

Bruce started to speak, then got painfully to his feet. Rod said, "I told you to report to Art, Bruce. Get over the wall and get moving."

McGowan looked startled. "Huh?"

“You heard me. I can’t waste time playing games. Check in with Art and get to work. Or keep moving and don’t come back. Now *move!*”

Bruce stared, then hobbled toward the wall. Rod turned and said, “Get back to work, folks. The fun is over. Cliff, you were going to show me the animals.”

“Huh? Look Rod, it’ll keep.”

“Yes, Rod,” Baxter agreed. “I want to put a sling on that arm. Then you should rest.”

Rod moved his arm gingerly. “I’ll try to get along without it. Come on, Cliff. Just you and me—we’ll skip the stobor hunt.”

He had trouble concentrating on what Cliff talked about… something about gelding a pair of fawns and getting them used to harness. What use was harness when they had no wagons? His head ached, his arm hurt and his brain felt fuzzy. What would Grant have done? He had failed…but what should he have said, or not said? Some days it wasn’t worth it.

“—so we’ve got to. You see, Rod?”

“Huh? Sure, Cliff.” He made a great effort to recall what Cliff had been saying. “Maybe wooden axles would do. I’ll see if Bill thinks he can build a cart.”

“But besides a cart, we need—”

Rod stopped him. “Cliff, if you say so, we’ll try it. I think I’ll take a shower. Uh, we’ll look at the field tomorrow.”

A shower made him feel better and much cleaner, although the water spilling milk-warm from the flume seemed too hot, then icy cold. He stumbled back to his hut and lay down. When he woke he found Shorty guarding his door to keep him from being disturbed.

It was three days before he felt up to inspecting the farm. Nielsen reported that McGowan was working, although sullenly. Caroline reported that Theo was obeying sanitary regulations and wearing a black eye. Rod was self-conscious about appearing in public, had even considered one restless night the advisability of resigning and letting someone who had not lost face take over the responsibility. But to his surprise his position seemed firmer than ever. A minority from Teller University, which he had thought of wryly as “loyal opposition,” now no longer seemed disposed to be critical. Curt Pulvermacher, their unofficial leader, looked Rod up and offered help. “Bruce is a bad apple, Rod. Don’t let him get down wind again. Let me know instead.”

“Thanks, Curt.”

“I mean it. It’s hard enough to get anywhere around here if we all pull together. We can’t have him riding roughshod over us. But don’t stick your chin out. We’ll teach him.”

Rod slept well that night. Perhaps he had not handled it as Grant would have, but it had worked out. Cowpertown was safe. Oh, there would be more troubles but the colony would sweat through them. Someday there would be a city here and this would be Cowper Square. Upstream would be the Nielsen Steel Works. There might even be a Walker Avenue…

He felt up to looking over the farm the next day. He told Cliff so and gathered the same party, Jimmy, Kent, and Mick. Spears in hand they climbed the stile at the wall and descended the ladder on the far side. Cliff gathered up a handful of dirt, tasted it. "The soil is all right. A little acid, maybe. We won't know until we can run soil chemistry tests. But the structure is good. If you tell that dumb Swede that the next thing he has to make is a plough…"

"Waxie isn't dumb. Give him time. Hell make you ploughs and tractors, too."

"I'll settle for a hand plough, drawn by a team of buck. Rod, my notion is this. We weed and it's an invitation to the buck to eat the crops. If we built another wall, all around and just as high—"

"A wall! Any idea how many man-hours that would take, Cliff?"

"That's not the point."

Rod looked around the alluvial flat, several times as large as the land enclosed in the city walls. A thorn fence, possibly, but not a wall, not yet… Cliff's ambitions were too big. "Look, let's comb the field for stobor, then send the others back. You and I can figure out afterwards what can be done."

"All right. But tell them to watch where they put their big feet."

Rod spread them in skirmish line with himself in the center. "Keep dressed up," he warned, "and don't let any get past you. Remember, every one we kill now means six less on S-Day."

They moved forward. Kenny made a kill, Jimmy immediately made two more. The stobor hardly tried to escape, being in the "dopy joe" phase of their cycle.

Rod paused to spear one and looked up to speak to the man on his right. But there was no one there. "Hold it! Where's Mick?"

"Huh? Why, he was right here a second ago."

Rod looked back. Aside from a shimmer over the hot field, there was nothing where Mick should have been. Something must have sneaked up in the grass, pulled him down—"Watch it, everybody! Something's wrong. Close in…and keep your eyes peeled." He turned back, moved diagonally toward where Mick had disappeared.

Suddenly two figures appeared in front of his eyes—Mick and a stranger.

A stranger in coveralls and shoes… The man looked around, called

over his shoulder, “Okay, Jake! Put her on automatic and clamp it.” He glanced toward Rod but did not seem to see him, walked toward him, and disappeared.

With heart pounding Rod began to run. He turned and found himself facing into an open gate…and down a long, closed corridor.

The man in the coveralls stepped into the frame. “Everybody back off,” he ordered. “We’re going to match in with the Gap. There may be local disturbance.”

15
In Achilles' Tent

IT HAD BEEN A HALF HOUR SINCE MICK HAD STUMBLED through the gate as it had focused, fallen flat in the low gravity of Luna. Rod was trying to bring order out of confusion, trying to piece together his own wits. Most of the villagers were out on the field, or sitting on top of the wall, watching technicians set up apparatus to turn the locus into a permanent gate, with controls and communications on both sides. Rod tried to tell one that they were exposed, that they should not run around unarmed; without looking up the man had said, "Speak to Mr. Johnson."

He found Mr. Johnson, tried again, was interrupted. "Will you kids *please* let us work? We're glad to see you—but we've got to get a power fence around this area. No telling what might be in that tall grass."

"Oh," Rod answered. "Look, I'll set guards. We know what to expect. I'm in ch—"

"Beat it, will you? You kids mustn't be impatient."

So Rod went back inside his city, hurt and angry. Several strangers came in, poked around as if they owned the place, spoke to the excited villagers, went out again. One stopped to look at Jimmy's drum, rapped it and laughed. Rod wanted to strangle him.

"Rod?"

"Uh?" He whirled around. "Yes, Margery?"

"Do I cook lunch, or don't I? All my girls have left and Mel says its silly because we'll all be gone by lunch time—and I don't know *what* to do."

"Huh? Nobody's leaving…that I know of."

"Well, maybe not but that's the talk."

He was not given time to consider this as one of the ubiquitous strangers came up and said briskly, "Can you tell me where to find a lad named Roderick Welker?"

"Walker," Rod corrected. "I'm Rod Walker. What do you want?"

"My name is Sansom, Clyde B. Sansom—Administrative Officer in the Emigration Control Service. Now, Welker, I understand you are group leader for these students. You can—"

"I am Mayor of Cowpertown," Rod said stonily. "What do you want?"

"Yes, yes, that's what the youngster called you. 'Mayor.'" Sansom

smiled briefly and went on. “Now, Walker, we want to keep things orderly. I know you are anxious to get out of your predicament as quickly as possible—but we must do things systematically. We are going to make it easy—just delousing and physical examination, followed by psychological tests and a relocation interview. Then you will all be free to return to your homes—after signing a waiver-of-liability form, but the legal officer will take care of that. If you will have your little band line up alphabetically—uh, here in this open space, I think, then I will—” He fumbled with his briefcase.

“*Who the deuce are you to give orders around here?*”

Sansom looked surprised. “Eh? I told you. If you want to be technical, I embody the authority of the Terran Corporation. I put it as a request—but under field conditions I can compel co-operation, you know.”

Rod felt himself turn red. “I don’t know anything of the sort! You may be a squad of angels back on Terra but you are in Cowpertown.”

Mr. Sansom looked interested but not impressed. “And what, may I ask, is Cowpertown?”

“Huh? *This* is Cowpertown, a Sovereign nation, with its own constitution, its own laws—and its own territory.” Rod took a breath. “If the Terran Corporation wants anything, they can send somebody and arrange it. But don’t tell us to line up alphabetically!”

“Atta boy, Roddie!”

Rod said, “Stick around, Carol,” then added to Sansom, “Understand me?”

“Do I understand,” Sansom said slowly, “that you are suggesting that the Corporation should appoint an *ambassador* to your group?”

“Well…that’s the general idea.”

“Mmmm…an interesting theory, Welker.”

“‘Walker.’ And until you do, you can darn well clear the sightseers out—and get out yourself. We aren’t a zoo.”

Sansom looked at Rod’s ribs, glanced at his dirty, calloused feet and smiled. Rod said, “Show him out, Carol. Put him out, if you have to.”

“Yes, *sir!*” She advanced on Sansom, grinning.

“Oh, I’m leaving,” Sansom said quickly. “Better a delay than a mistake in protocol. An ingenious theory, young man. Good-by. We shall see each other later. Uh…a word of advice? May I?”

“Huh? All right.”

“Don’t take yourself too seriously. Ready, young lady?”

Rod stayed in his hut. He wanted badly to see what was going on beyond the wall, but he did not want to run into Sansom. So he sat and gnawed his thumb and thought. Apparently some weak sisters were

going back—wave a dish of ice cream under their noses and off they would trot, abandoning their land, throwing away all they had built up. Well, *he* wouldn't! This was home, his place, he had earned it; he wasn't going back and maybe wait half a lifetime for a chance to move to some other planet probably not as good.

Let them go! Cowpertown would be better and stronger without them.

Maybe some just wanted to make a visit, show off grandchildren to grandparents, then come back. Probably…in which case they had better make sure that Sansom or somebody gave them written clearance to come back. Maybe he ought to warn them.

But *he* didn't have anyone to visit. Except Sis—and Sis might be anywhere—unlikely that she was on Terra.

Bob and Carmen, carrying Hope, came in to say good-by. Rod shook hands solemnly. "You're coming back, Bob, when you get your degree…aren't you?"

"Well, we hope so, if possible. If we are permitted to."

"Who's going to stop you? It's your *right*. And when you do, you'll find us here. In the meantime we'll try not to break legs."

Baxter hesitated. "Have you been to the gate lately, Rod?"

"No. Why?"

"Uh, don't plan too far ahead. I believe some have already gone back."

"How many?"

"Quite a number." Bob would not commit himself further. He gave Rod the addresses of his parents and Carmen's, soberly wished him a blessing, and left.

Margery did not come back and the fire pit remained cold. Rod did not care, he was not hungry. Jimmy came in at what should have been shortly after lunch, nodded and sat down. Presently he said, "I've been out at the gate."

"So?"

"Yup. You know, Rod, a lot of people wondered why you weren't there to say good-by."

"They could come *here* to say good-by!"

"Yes, so they could. But the word got around that you didn't approve. Maybe they were embarrassed."

"Me?" Rod laughed without mirth. "I don't care how many city boys run home to mama. It's a free country." He glanced at Jim. "How many are sticking?"

"Uh, I don't know."

“I’ve been thinking. If the group gets small, we might move back to the cave just to sleep, I mean. Until we get more colonists.”

“Maybe.”

“Don’t be so glum! Even if it got down to just you and me and Jackie and Carol, we’d be no worse off than we once were. And it would just be temporary. There’d be the baby, of course—I almost forgot to mention my godson.”

“There’s the baby,” Jimmy agreed.

“What are you pulling a long face about? Jim…*you’re* not thinking of leaving?”

Jimmy stood up. “Jackie said to tell you that we would stick by whatever you thought was best.”

Rod thought over what Jimmy had not said. “You mean she wants to go back? Both of you do.”

“Now, Rod, we’re partners. But I’ve got the kid to think about. You see that?”

“Yes. I see.”

“Well—”

Rod stuck out his hand. “Good luck, Jim. Tell Jackie good-by for me.”

“Oh, she’s waiting to say good-by herself. With the kid.”

“Uh, tell her not to. Somebody once told me that saying good-by was a mistake. Be seeing you.”

“Well—so long, Rod. Take care of yourself.”

“You, too. If you see Caroline, tell her to come in.”

Caroline was slow appearing; he guessed that she had been at the gate. He said bluntly, “How many are left?”

“Not many,” she admitted.

“*How* many?”

“You and me—and a bunch of gawkers.”

“*Nobody* else?”

“I checked them off the list. Roddie, what do we do now?”

“Huh? It doesn’t matter. Do *you* want to go back?”

“You’re boss, Roddie. You’re the Mayor.”

“Mayor of what? Carol, do you *want* to go back?”

“Roddie, I never thought about it. I was happy here. But—”

“But what?”

“The town is gone, the kids are gone—and I’ve got only a year if I’m ever going to be a cadet Amazon.” She blurted out the last, then

added, “But I’ll stick if you do.”

“No.”

“I will so!”

“No. But I want you to do something when you go back.”

“What?”

“Get in touch with my sister Helen. Find out where she is stationed. Assault Captain Helen Walker—got it? Tell her I’m okay…and tell her I said to help you get into the Corps.”

“Uh… Roddie, I don’t *want* to go!”

“Beat it. They might relax the gate and leave you behind.”

“You come, too.”

“No. I’ve got things to do. But you hurry. Don’t say good-by. Just go.”

“You’re mad at me, Roddie?”

“Of course not. But go, *please*, or you’ll have me bawling, too.”

She gave a choked cry, grabbed his head and smacked his cheek, then galloped away, her sturdy legs pounding. Rod went into his shack and lay face down. After a while he got up and began to tidy Cowpertown. It was littered, dirtier than it had been since the morning of Grant’s death.

It was late afternoon before anyone else came into the village. Rod heard and saw them long before they saw him—two men and a woman. The men were dressed in city garb; she was wearing shorts, shirt, and smart sandals. Rod stepped out and said, “What do you want?” He was carrying his spear.

The woman squealed, then looked and added, “Wonderful!”

One man was carrying a pack and tripod which Rod recognized as multi-recorder of the all-purpose sight-smell-sound-touch sort used by news services and expeditions. He said nothing, set his tripod down, plugged in cables and started fiddling with dials. The other man, smaller, ginger haired, and with a terrier mustache, said, “You’re Walker? The one the others call ‘the Mayor’?”

“Yes.”

“Kosmic hasn’t been in here?”

“Cosmic what?”

“Kosmic Keynotes, of course. Or anybody? LIFE-TIME-SPACE? Galaxy Features?”

“I don’t know what you mean. There hasn’t been anybody here since morning.”

The stranger twitched his mustache and sighed. “That’s all I want to

know. Go into your trance, Ellie. Start your box, Mac."

"Wait a minute," Rod demanded. "Who are you and what do you want?"

"Eh? I'm Evans of Empire… Empire Enterprises."

"Pulitzer Prize," the other man said and went on working;

"With Mac's help," Evans added quickly. "The lady is Ellie Ellens herself."

Rod looked puzzled. Evans said, "You don't *know?* Son, where have you—never mind. She's the highest paid emotional writer in the system. She'll interpret you so that every woman reader from the *Outlands Overseer* to the *London Times* will cry over you and want to comfort you. She's a *great* artist."

Miss Ellens did not seem to hear the tribute. She wandered around with a blank face, stopping occasionally to look or touch.

She turned and said to Rod, "Is this where you held your primitive dances?"

"What? We held square dances here, once a week."

"'Square dances'… Well, we can change that." She went back into her private world.

"The point is, brother," Evans went on, "we don't want just an interview. Plenty of that as they came through. That's how we found out you were here—and dropped everything to see you. I'm not going to dicker; name your own price—but it's got to be exclusive, news, features, commercial rights, everything. Uh…" Evans looked around. "Advisory service, too, when the actors arrive."

"Actors?!"

"Of course. If the Control Service had the sense to sneeze, they would have held you all here until a record was shot. But we can do it better with actors. I want you at my elbow every minute—we'll have somebody play your part. Besides that—"

"Wait a minute!" Rod butted in. "Either I'm crazy or you are. In the first place I don't want your money."

"Huh? You signed with somebody? That guard let another outfit in ahead of us?"

"What guard? I haven't seen anybody."

Evans looked relieved. "We'll work it out. The guard they've got to keep anybody from crossing your wall—I thought he might have both hands out. But don't say you don't need money; that's immoral."

"Well, I don't. We don't use money here."

"Sure, sure…but you've got a family, haven't you? Families always need money. Look, let's not fuss. We'll treat you right and you can let it pile up in the bank. I just want you to get signed up."

“I don’t see why I should.”

“Binder,” said Mac.

“Mmm…yes, Mac. See here, brother, think it over. Just let us have a binder that you won’t sign with anybody else. You can still stick us for anything your conscience will let you. Just a binder, with a thousand plutons on the side.”

“I’m not going to sign with anybody else.”

“Got that, Mac?”

“Canned.”

Evans turned to Rod. “You don’t object to answering questions in the meantime, do you? And maybe a few pictures?”

“Uh, I don’t care.” Rod was finding them puzzling and a little annoying, but they were company and he was bitterly lonely.

“Fine!” Evans drew him out with speed and great skill. Rod found himself telling more than he realized he knew. At one point Evans asked about dangerous animals. “I understand they are pretty rough here. Much trouble?”

“Why, no,” Rod answered with sincerity. “We never had real trouble with animals. What trouble we had was with people…and not much of that.”

“You figure this will be a premium colony?”

“Of course. The others were fools to leave. This place is like Terra, only safer and richer and plenty of land. In a few years—say!”

“Say what?”

“How did it happen that they left us here? We were only supposed to be here ten days.”

“Didn’t they tell you?”

“Well…maybe the others were told. I never heard.”

“It was the supernova, of course. Delta, uh—”

“Delta Gamma one thirteen,” supplied Mac.

“That’s it. Space-time distortion, but I’m no mathematician.”

“Fluxion,” said Mac.

“Whatever that is. They’ve been fishing for you ever since. As I understand it, the wave front messed up their figures for this whole region. Incidentally, brother, when you go back—”

“I’m not going back.”

“Well, even on a visit. Don’t sign a waiver. The Board is trying to call it an ‘Act of God’ and duck responsibility. So let me put a bug in your ear: don’t sign away your rights. A friendly hint, huh?”

“Thanks. I won’t—well, thanks anyhow.”

"Now how about action pix for the lead stories?"

"Well…okay."

"Spear," said Mac.

"Yeah, I believe you had some sort of spear. Mind holding it?"

Rod got it as the great Ellie joined them. "Wonderful!" she breathed. "I can feel it. It shows how thin the line is between man and beast. A hundred cultured boys and girls slipping back to illiteracy, back to the stone age, the veneer sloughing away…reverting to savagery. Glorious!"

"Look here!" Rod said angrily. "Cowpertown wasn't that way at all! We had laws, we had a constitution, we kept clean. We—" He stopped; Miss Ellens wasn't listening.

"Savage ceremonies," she said dreamily. "A village witch doctor pitting ignorance and superstition against nature. Primitive fertility rites —" She stopped and said to Mac in a businesslike voice, "We'll shoot the dances three times. Cover 'em a little for 'A' list; cover 'em up a lot for the family list—and peel them down for the 'B' list. Got it?"

"Got it," agreed Mac.

"I'll do three commentaries," she added. "It will be worth the trouble." She reverted to her trance.

"Wait a minute!" Rod protested. "If she means what I think she means, there won't be any pictures, with or without actors."

"Take it easy," Evans advised. "I said you would be technical supervisor, didn't I? Or would you rather we did it without you? Ellie is all right, brother. What you don't know—and *she* does—is that you have to shade the truth to get at the real truth, the underlying truth. You'll see."

"But—"

Mac stepped up to him. "Hold still."

Rod did so, as Mac raised his hand. Rod felt the cool touch of an air brush.

"Hey! What are you doing?"

"Make up." Mac returned to his gear.

"Just a little war paint," Evans explained. "The pic needs color. It will wash off."

Rod opened his mouth and eyes in utter indignation; without knowing it he raised his spear. "Get it, Mac!" Evans ordered.

"Got it," Mac answered calmly.

Rod fought to bring his anger down to where he could talk. "Take that tape out," he said softly. "Throw it on the ground. Then get out."

"Slow down," Evans advised. "You'll like that pic. We'll send you

one."

"Take it out. Or I'll bust the box and anybody who gets in my way!" He aimed his spear at the multiple lens.

Mac slipped in front, protected it with his body. Evans called out, "Better look at *this*."

Evans had him covered with a small but businesslike gun. "We go a lot of funny places, brother, but we go prepared. You damage that recorder, or hurt one of us, and you'll be sued from here to breakfast. It's a serious matter to interfere with a news service, brother. The public has rights, you know." He raised his voice. "Ellie! We're leaving."

"Not yet," she answered dreamily. "I must steep myself in—"

"Right now! It's an 'eight-six' with the Reuben Steuben!"

"Okay!" she snapped in her other voice.

Rod let them go. Once they were over the wall he went back to the city hall, sat down, held his knees and shook.

Later he climbed the stile and looked around. A guard was on duty below him; the guard looked up but said nothing. The gate was relaxed to a mere control hole but a loading platform had been set up and a power fence surrounded it and joined the wall. Someone was working at a control board set up on a flatbed truck; Rod decided that they must be getting ready for major immigration. He went back and prepared a solitary meal, the poorest he had eaten in more than a year. Then he went to bed and listened to the jungle "Grand Opera" until he went to sleep.

"Anybody home?"

Rod came awake instantly, realized that it was morning—and that not all nightmares were dreams. "Who's there?"

"Friend of yours." B. P. Matson stuck his head in the door. "Put that whittler away. I'm harmless."

Rod bounced up. "Deacon! I mean 'Doctor.'"

"'Deacon,'" Matson corrected. "I've got a visitor for you." He stepped aside and Rod saw his sister.

Some moments later Matson said mildly, "If you two can unwind and blow your noses, we might get this on a coherent basis."

Rod backed off and looked at his sister. "My, you look *wonderful*, Helen." She was in mufti, dressed in a gay tabard and briefs. "You've lost weight."

"Not much. Better distributed, maybe. You've gained, Rod. My baby brother is a man."

"How did you—" Rod stopped, struck by suspicion. "You didn't come here to talk me into going back? If you did, you can save your

breath."

Matson answered hastily. "No, no, no! Farthest thought from our minds. But we heard about your decision and we wanted to see you—so I did a little politicking and got us a pass." He added, "Nominally I'm a temporary field agent for the service."

"Oh. Well, I'm certainly glad to see you…as long as that is understood."

"Sure, sure!" Matson took out a pipe, stoked and fired it. "I admire your choice, Rod. First time I've been on Tangaroa."

"On what?"

"Huh? Oh. Tangaroa. Polynesian goddess, I believe. Did you folks give it another name?"

Rod considered it. "To tell the truth, we never got around to it. It… well, it just *was*."

Matson nodded. "Takes two of anything before you need names. But it's lovely, Rod. I can see you made a lot of progress."

"We would have done all right," Rod said bitterly, "if they hadn't jerked the rug out." He shrugged. "Like to look around?"

"I surely would."

"All right. Come on, Sis. Wait a minute—I haven't had breakfast; how about you?"

"Well, when we left the Gap is was pushing lunch time. I could do with a bite. Helen?"

"Yes, indeed."

Rod scrounged in Margery's supplies. The haunch on which he had supped was not at its best. He passed it to Matson. "Too high?"

Matson sniffed it. "Pretty gamy. I can eat it if you can."

"We should have hunted yesterday, but…things happened." He frowned. "Sit tight. I'll get cured meat." He ran up to the cave, found a smoked side and some salted strips. When he got back Matson had a fire going. There was nothing else to serve; no fruit had been gathered the day before. Rod was uneasily aware that their breakfasts must have been very different.

But he got over it in showing off how much they had done—potter's wheel, Sue's loom with a piece half finished, the flume with the village fountain and the showers that ran continuously, iron artifacts that Art and Doug had hammered out. "I'd like to take you up to Art's iron works but there is no telling what we might run into."

"Come now, Rod, I'm not a city boy. Nor is your sister helpless."

Rod shook his head. "I know this country; you don't. I can go up there at a trot. But the only way for you would be a slow sneak, because I can't cover you both."

Matson nodded. “You’re right. It seems odd to have one of my students solicitous over my health. But you are right. We don’t know this set up.”

Rod showed them the stobor traps and described the annual berserk migration. “Stobor pour through those holes and fall in the pits. The other animals swarm past, as solid as city traffic for hours.”

“Catastrophic adjustment,” Matson remarked.

“Huh? Oh, yes, we figured that out. Cyclic catastrophic balance, just like human beings. If we had facilities, we could ship thousands of carcasses back to Earth every dry season.” He considered it. “Maybe we will, now.”

“Probably.”

“But up to now it has been just a troublesome nuisance. These stobor especially—I’ll show you one out in the field when—say!” Rod looked thoughtful. “These *are* stobor, aren’t they? Little carnivores heavy in front, about the size of a tom cat and eight times as nasty?”

“Why ask me?”

“Well, you warned us against stobor. All the classes were warned.”

“I suppose these must be stobor,” Matson admitted, “but I did not know what they looked like.”

“Huh?”

“Rod, every planet has its ‘stobor’…all different. Sometimes more than one sort.” He stopped to tap his pipe. “You remember me telling the class that every planet has unique dangers, different from every other planet in the Galaxy?”

“Yes…”

“Sure, and it meant nothing, a mere intellectual concept. But you have to be afraid of the thing behind the concept, if you are to stay alive. So we personify it…but we don’t tell you what it is. We do it differently each year. It is to warn you that the unknown and deadly can lurk anywhere…and to plant it deep in your guts instead of in your head.”

“Well, I’ll be a—Then there *weren’t* any stobor! There never were!”

“Sure there were. You built these traps for them, didn’t you?”

When they returned, Matson sat on the ground and said, “We can’t stay long, you know.”

“I realize that. Wait a moment.” Rod went into his hut, dug out Lady Macbeth, rejoined them. “Here’s your knife, Sis. It saved my skin more than once. Thanks.”

She took the knife and caressed it, then cradled it and looked past Rod’s head. It flashed by him, went tuck-*spong!* in a corner post. She

recovered it, came back and handed it to Rod. “Keep it, dear, wear it always in safety and health.”

“Gee, Sis, I shouldn’t. I’ve had it too long now.”

“Please. I’d like to know that Lady Macbeth is watching over you, wherever you are. And I don’t need a knife much now.”

“Huh? Why not?”

“Because I married her,” Matson answered.

Rod was caught speechless. His sister looked at him and said, “What’s the matter, Buddy? Don’t you approve?”

“Huh? Oh, sure! It’s…” He dug into his memory, fell back on quoted ritual: “‘May the Principle make you one. May your union be fruitful.’”

“Then come here and kiss me.”

Rod did so, remembered to shake hands with the Deacon. It was all right, he guessed, but—well, how old were they? Sis must be thirtyish and the Deacon…why the Deacon was *old*—probably past forty.

It did not seem quite decent.

But he did his best to make them feel that he approved. After he thought it over he decided that if two people, with their lives behind them, wanted company in their old age, why, it was probably a good thing.

“So you see,” Matson went on, “I had a double reason to look you up. In the first place, though I am no longer teaching, it is vexing to mislay an entire class. In the second place, when one of them is your brother-in-law it is downright embarrassing.”

“You’ve quit teaching?”

“Yes. The Board and I don’t see eye to eye on policy. Secondly, I’m leading a party out…and this time your sister and I are going to settle down and prove a farm.” Matson looked at him. “Wouldn’t be interested, would you? I need a salted lieutenant.”

“Huh? Thanks, but as I told you, this is my place. Uh, where are you going?”

“Territa, out toward the Hyades. Nice place—they are charging a stiff premium.”

Rod shrugged. “Then I couldn’t afford it.”

“As my lieutenant, you’d be exempt. But I wasn’t twisting your arm; I just thought you ought to have a chance to turn it down. I have to get along with your sister, you know.”

Rod glanced at Helen. “Sorry, Sis.”

“It’s all right, Buddy. We’re not trying to live your life.”

“Mmm…no.” Matson puffed hard; then went on. “However, as

your putative brother and former teacher I feel obligated to mention a couple of things. I'm not trying to sell you anything, but I'll appreciate it if you'll listen. Okay?"

"Well…go ahead."

"This is a good spot. But you might go back to school, you know. Acquire recognized professional status. If you refuse recall, here you stay…forever. You won't see the rest of the Outlands. They won't give you free passage back later. But a professional gets around, he sees the world. Your sister and I have been on some fifty planets. School does not look attractive now—you're a man and it will be hard to wear boy's shoes. But—" Matson swept an arm, encompassed all of Cowpertown, "—this counts. You can skip courses, get field credit. I have some drag with the Chancellor of Central Tech. Hmmm?"

Rod sat with stony face, then shook his head. "Okay," said Matson briskly. "No harm done."

"Wait. Let me tell you." Rod tried to think how to explain how he felt…"Nothing, I guess," he said gruffly.

Matson smoked in silence. "You were leader here," he said at last.

"Mayor," Rod corrected. "Mayor of Cowpertown. I *was* the Mayor, I mean."

"You *are* the Mayor. Population one, but you are still boss. And even those bureaucrats in the control service wouldn't dispute that you've proved the land. Technically you are an autonomous colony—I hear you told Sansom that." Matson grinned. "You're alone, however. You can't live alone, Rod…not and stay human."

"Well, yes—but aren't they going to settle this planet?"

"Sure. Probably fifty thousand this year, four times that many in two years. But, Rod, you would be part of the mob. They'll bring their own leaders."

"*I* don't have to be boss! I just—well, I don't want to give up Cowpertown."

"Rod, Cowpertown is safe in history, along with Plymouth Rock, Botany Bay, and Dakin's Colony. The citizens of Tangaroa will undoubtedly preserve it as a historical shrine. Whether you stay is another matter. Nor am I trying to persuade you. I was simply pointing out alternatives." He stood up. "About time we started, Helen."

"Yes, dear." She accepted his hand and stood up.

"Wait a minute!" insisted Rod. "Deacon… Sis! I know I sound like a fool. I know this is gone…the town, and the kids, and everything. But I *can't* go back." He added, "It's not that I don't want to."

Matson nodded. "I understand you."

"I don't see how. *I* don't."

“Maybe I’ve been there. Rod, everyone of us is beset by two things: a need to go home, and the impossibility of doing it. You are at the age when these hurt worst. You’ve been thrown into a situation that makes the crisis doubly acute. You—don’t interrupt me—you’ve been a man here, the old man of the tribe, the bull of the herd. That is why the others could go back but you can’t. Wait, please! I suggested that you might find it well to go back and be an adolescent for a while…and it seems unbearable. I’m not surprised. It would be easier to be a small child. Children are another race and adults deal with them as such. But adolescents are neither adult nor child. They have the impossible, unsolvable, tragic problems of all fringe cultures. They don’t belong, they are second-class citizens, economically and socially insecure. It is a difficult period and I don’t blame you for not wanting to return to it. I simply think it might pay. But you have been king of a whole world; I imagine that term papers and being told to wipe your feet and such are out of the question. So good luck. Coming, dear?”

“Deacon,” his wife said, “Aren’t you going to *tell* him?”

“It has no bearing. It would be an unfair way to influence his judgment.”

“You *men!* I’m glad I’m not male!”

“So am I,” Matson agreed pleasantly.

“I didn’t mean that. Men behave as if logic were stepping on crack in a sidewalk. I’m going to tell him.”

“On your head be it.”

“Tell me *what?*” demanded Rod.

“She means,” said Matson, “that your parents are back.”

“*What?*”

“Yes, Buddy. They left stasis a week ago and Daddy came out of the hospital today. He’s well. But we haven’t told him all about you—we haven’t known *what* to say.”

The facts were simple, although Rod found them hard to soak up. Medical techniques had developed in two years, not a pessimistic twenty; it had been possible to relax the stasis, operate, and restore Mr. Walker to the world. Helen had known for months that such outcome was likely, but their father’s physician had not approved until he was sure. It had been mere coincidence that Tangaroa had been located at almost the same time. To Rod one event was as startling as the other; his parents had been dead to him for a long time.

“My dear,” Matson said sternly, “now that you have thrown him into a whingding, shall we go?”

“Yes. But I had to tell him.” Helen kissed Rod quickly, turned to her husband. They started to walk away.

Rod watched them, his face contorted in an agony of indecision.

Suddenly he called out, “Wait! I’m coming with you.”

“All right,” Matson answered. He turned his good eye toward his wife and drooped the lid in a look of satisfaction that was not quite a wink. “If you are sure that is what you want to do, I’ll help you get your gear together.”

“Oh, I haven’t any baggage. Let’s go.”

Rod stopped only long enough to free the penned animals.

16

The Endless Road

MATSON CHAPERONED HIM THROUGH EMIGRANTS' GAP, saved from possible injury a functionary who wanted to give Rod psychological tests, and saw to it that he signed no waivers. He had him bathed, shaved, and barbered, then fetched him clothes, before he let him be exposed to the Terran world. Matson accompanied them only to Kaibab Gate. "I'm supposed to have a lodge dinner, or something, so that you four can be alone as a family. About nine, dear. See you, Rod." He kissed his wife and left.

"Sis? Dad doesn't know I'm coming?"

Helen hesitated. "He knows. I screened him while Deacon was primping you." She added, "Remember, Rod, Dad has been ill…and the time has been only a couple of weeks to him."

"Oh, that's so, isn't it?" Used all his life to Ramsbotham anomalies, Rod nevertheless found those concerned with time confusing—planet-hopping via the gates did not seem odd. Besides, he was extremely edgy without knowing why, the truth being that he was having an attack of fear of crowds. The Matsons had anticipated it but had not warned him lest they make him worse.

The walk through tall trees just before reaching home calmed him. The necessity for checking all cover for dangerous animals and keeping a tree near him always in mind gave his subconscious something familiar to chew on. He arrived home almost cheerful without being aware either that he had been frightened by crowds or soothed by non-existent dangers of an urban forest.

His father looked browned and healthy—but shorter and smaller. He embraced his son and his mother kissed him and wept. "It's good to have you home, son. I understand you had quite a trip."

"It's good to be home, Dad."

"I think these tests are much too strenuous, I really do."

Rod started to explain that it really had not been a test, that it had not been strenuous, and that Cowpertown—Tangaroa, rather—had been a soft touch. But he got mixed up and was disturbed by the presence of "Aunt" Nora Peascoat—no relation but a childhood friend of his mother. Besides, his father was not listening.

But Mrs. Peascoat was listening, and looking—peering with little eyes through folds of flesh. "Why, Roderick Walker, I *knew* that couldn't have been a picture of you."

“Eh?” asked his father. “What picture?”

“Why, that wild-man picture that had Roddie’s name on it. You must have seen it; it was on facsimile and Empire Hour both. I knew it wasn’t him. I said to Joseph, ‘Joseph,’ I said, ‘that’s not a picture of Rod Walker—its a fake.’”

“I must have missed it. As you know, I—”

“I’ll send it to you; I clipped it. I knew it was a fake. It’s a horrible thing, a great naked savage with pointed teeth and a fiendish grin and a long spear and war paint all over its ugly face. I said to Joseph—”

“As you know, I returned from hospital just this morning, Nora. Rod, there was no picture of you on the news services, surely?”

“Uh, yes and no. Maybe.”

“I don’t follow you. Why should there be a picture of you?”

“There wasn’t any reason. This bloke just took it.”

“Then there *was* a picture?”

“Yes.” Rod saw that “Aunt” Nora was eyeing him avidly: “But it was a fake—sort of.”

“I still don’t follow you.”

“Please, Pater,” Helen intervened. “Rod had a tiring trip. This can wait.”

“Oh, surely. I don’t see how a picture can be ‘a sort of a fake.’”

“Well, Dad, this man painted my face when I wasn’t looking. I—” Rod stopped, realizing that it sounded ridiculous.

“Then it *was* your picture?” “Aunt” Nora insisted.

“I’m not going to say any more.”

Mr. Walker blinked. “Perhaps that is best.”

“Aunt” Nora looked ruffled. “Well, I suppose *anything* can happen way off in those odd places. From the teaser on Empire Hour I understand some very strange things did happen…not all of them *nice*.”

She looked as if daring Rod to deny it. Rod said nothing. She went on, “I don’t know what you were thinking of, letting a boy do such things. My father always said that if the Almighty had intended us to use those gate things instead of rocket ships He would have provided His own holes in the sky.”

Helen said sharply, “Mrs. Peascoat, in what way is a rocket ship more natural than a gate?”

“Why, Helen Walker! I’ve been ‘Aunt Nora’ all your life. ‘Mrs. Peascoat’ indeed!”

Helen shrugged. “And *my* name is Matson, not Walker—as you know.”

Mrs. Walker, distressed and quite innocent, broke in to ask Mrs. Peascoat to stay for dinner. Mr. Walker added, “Yes, Nora, join us Under the Lamp.”

Rod counted to ten. But Mrs. Peascoat said she was *sure* they wanted to be *alone*, they had so *much* to talk about…and his father did not insist.

Rod quieted during ritual, although he stumbled in responses and once left an awkward silence. Dinner was wonderfully good, but he was astonished by the small portions; Terra must be under severe rationing. But everyone seemed happy and so he was.

“I’m sorry about this mix-up,” his father told him. “I suppose it means that you will have to repeat a semester at Patrick Henry.”

“On the contrary, Pater,” Helen answered, “Deacon is sure that Rod can enter Central Tech with advanced standing.”

“Really? They were more strict in my day.”

“All of that group will get special credit. What they learned cannot be learned in classrooms.”

Seeing that his father was inclined to argue Rod changed the subject. “Sis, that reminds me. I gave one of the girls your name, thinking you were still in the Corps—she wants to be appointed cadet, you see. You can still help her, can’t you?”

“I can advise her and perhaps coach her for the exams. Is this important to you, Buddy?”

“Well, yes. And she is number-one officer material. She’s a big girl, even bigger than you are—and she looks a bit like you. She is smart like you, too, around genius, and always good-natured and willing—but strong and fast and incredibly violent when you need it…sudden death in all directions.”

“Roderick.” His father glanced at the lamp.

“Uh, sorry, Dad. I was just describing her.”

“Very well. Son…when did you start picking up your meat with your fingers?”

Rod dropped the tidbit and blushed. “Excuse me. We didn’t have forks.”

Helen chuckled. “Never mind, Rod. Pater, it’s perfectly natural. Whenever we paid off any of our girls we always put them through reorientation to prepare them for the perils of civil life. And fingers were made before forks.”

“Mmm…no doubt. Speaking of reorientation, there is something we must do, daughter, before this family will be organized again.”

“So?”

“Yes. I mean the transfer of guardianship. Now that I am well, by a

miracle, I must reassume my responsibilities."

Rod's mind slipped several cogs before it penetrated that Dad was talking about *him*. Guardian? Oh… Sis was his guardian, wasn't she? But it didn't mean anything.

Helen hesitated. "I suppose so, Pater," she said, her eyes on Rod, "if Buddy wants to."

"Eh? That is not a factor, daughter. Your husband won't want the responsibility of supervising a young boy—and it is my obligation… and privilege."

Helen looked annoyed. Rod said, "I can't see that it matters, Dad. I'll be away at college—and after all I am nearly old enough to vote."

His mother looked startled. "Why, Roddie dear!"

"Yes," agreed his father. "I'm afraid I can't regard a gap of three years as negligible."

"What do you mean, Dad? I'll be of age in January."

Mrs. Walker clasped a hand to her mouth. "Jerome we've forgotten the time lag again. Oh, my baby boy!"

Mr. Walker looked astonished, muttered something about "—very difficult" and gave attention to his plate. Presently he looked up. "You'll pardon me, Rod. Nevertheless, until you are of age I must do what I can; I hardly think I want you to live away from home while at college."

"Sir? Why not?"

"Well—I feel that we have drifted apart, and not all for the best. Take this girl you spoke of in such surprising terms. Am I correct in implying that she was, eh…a close chum?"

Rod felt himself getting warm. "She was my city manager," he said flatly.

"Your *what?*"

"My executive officer. She was captain of the guard, chief of police, anything you want to call her. She did everything. She hunted, too, but that was just because she liked to. Carol is, uh—well, Carol is *swell*."

"Roderick, are you *involved* with this girl?"

"Me? Gosh, no! She was more like a big sister. Oh, Carol was sweet on half a dozen fellows, one time or another, but it never lasted."

"I am very glad to hear that you are not seriously interested in her. She does not sound like desirable companionship for a young boy."

"Dad—you don't know what you are saying!"

"Perhaps. I intend to find out. But what is this other matter? 'City Manager!' What were *you?*"

"I," Rod said proudly, "was Mayor of Cowpertown."

His father looked at him, then shook his head. “We’ll speak of this later. Possibly you need, eh—medical help.” He looked at Helen. “We’ll attend to the change in guardianship tomorrow. I can see that there is much I must take care of.”

Helen met his eyes. “Not unless Buddy consents.”

“Daughter!”

“The transfer was irrevocable. He will have to agree or I won’t do it!”

Mr. Walker looked shocked, Mrs. Walker looked stricken. Rod got up and left the room…the first time anyone had ever done so while the Lamp of Peace was burning. He heard his father call after him but he did not turn back.

He found Matson in his room, smoking and reading. “I grabbed a bite and let myself in quietly,” Matson explained. He inspected Rod’s face. “I told you,” he said slowly, “that it would be rough. Well, sweat it out, son, sweat it out.”

“I can’t *stand* it!”

“Yes, you can.”

In Emigrants’ Gap the sturdy cross-country wagons were drawn up in echelon, as they had been so often before and would be so many times again. The gate was not ready; drivers gathered at the booth under Liberty’s skirts, drinking coffee and joking through the nervous wait. Their professional captain was with them, a lean, homely young man with deep lines in his face, from sun and laughing and perhaps some from worry. But he did not seem to be worrying now; he was grinning and drinking coffee and sharing a doughnut with a boy child. He was dressed in fringed buckskin, in imitation of a very old style; he wore a Bill Cody beard and rather long hair. His mount was a little pinto, standing patiently by with reins hanging. There was a boot scabbard holding a hunting rifle on the nigh side of the saddle, but the captain carried no guns on his person; instead he wore two knives, one on each side.

A siren sounded and a speaker above the Salvation Army booth uttered: “Captain Walker, ready with gate four.”

Rod waved at the control booth and shouted, “Call off!” then turned back to Jim and Jacqueline. “Tell Carol I’m sorry she couldn’t get leave. I’ll be seeing you.”

“Might be sooner than you think,” asserted Jim. “My firm is going to bid this contract.”

“Your firm? Where do you get that noise? Have they made him a partner, Jackie?”

“No,” she answered serenely, “but I’m sure they will as soon as he is admitted to the Outlands bar. Kiss Uncle Rod good-by, Grant.”

“No,” the youngster answered firmly.

“Just like his father,” Jimmy said proudly. “Kisses women only.”

The count was running back down; Rod heard it and swung into saddle. “Take it easy, kids.” The count passed him, finished with a shouted, “*ONE!*”

“Reins up! Reeeiins *UP!*” He waited with arm raised and glanced through the fully-dilated gate past rolling prairie at snow-touched peaks beyond. His nostrils widened.

The control light turned green. He brought his arm down hard and shouted, “Roll ’em! *Ho!*” as he squeezed and released the little horse with his knees. The pinto sprang forward, cut in front of the lead wagon, and Captain Walker headed out on his long road.